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NETTA SYRETT

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BY

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ANNE PAGE

I

AT the hour between sunset and twilight Miss Page was generally to be found in her garden.

The long irregular front of Fairholme Court faced the west, and before it, through the interminable evenings of summer, was spread the pageant of the sunset, the quiet glory of the after-glow, and finally the transition, mysterious, indefinably subtle, from the light of day, to the vaporous purple of night.

It was at this quiet end of evening that the garden, always beautiful, took on an added grace, the dream-like delicate charm which belongs to the enchanted places of the earth—places such as Corot knew, and with a magic equal to their own, has transferred upon canvasses which hold for ever the glamour of the dawn or the mystic spell of twilight.

The house, built originally in the last years of Elizabeth, and enlarged in succeeding

reigns, was a medley of incongruous architecture, resulting in a style delightful and fantastic enough for a dwelling in a fairy tale. The latest wing, added in Georgian days, its red brick toned now to a restful mellow colour, imparted an air of formal stateliness to the irregular but charming structure.

Roses wreathed the latticed window-panes of the older part of the house ; clematis rioted over part of the roof and climbed the chimney-stacks. On the sunny walls of the later wing a vine had been trained.

The door of the panelled hall in the middle of the house opened upon a square of flag-stones, and level with these, a lawn, its smoothness unspoilt by flower-beds, stretched to a sunk fence from which meadowland, whose broad expanse was broken here and there by groups of elms, extended far as the eye could see till its verge touched the sunset sky.

On the lawn to the right of the house, one magnificent beech tree swept the ground with its lower branches, and then soared majestically towards the sky. On the left there was a group of chestnuts. But, except for a small white fountain opposite the hall porch, the lawn in its velvet softness was left unadorned.

The fountain Miss Page had brought back after one of her periodical journeys to Italy. It was a slight, graceful thing, of delicate workmanship, its thread of water falling from a fluted shell into a square marble basin. It was a fountain beloved by the fan-tailed pigeons, who from their dovecote behind the kitchen garden came to it often to drink. When they perched on the edge of the shell, or walked near it on the grass, their snowy tails outspread, a hint of Italian courtyards, a sort of fragrance of Italy, was wafted into the English garden.

All the flowers grew in secluded sheltered spots, protected by high walls or hedges of yew.

Away from the lawn, behind the beech tree, a moss-grown wall into which a little gate was set, gave promise of scent and colour within—of a garden enclosed.

This particular enclosure, one of many, was known as the "lavender garden." It was arranged in the formal Dutch fashion—divided into square beds filled with pink monthly roses, each bed surrounded by a thick border of lavender. A sundial stood in the midst, and against the sundial, her elbows resting upon its lichen-stained plate, leant Anne Page, her face turned towards the lingering sunset.

She was expecting friends to dinner, but unable to resist the temptation of the garden, she had wandered from the drawing-room into the sweet evening air. She wore a dress the colour of which, in its shades of grey-green and purple, might have been suggested by the lavender in the borders. It was a graceful flowing dress; beautiful naturally, inevitably. Anne Page possessed the gift of surrounding herself with everything that was exquisite, as simply as a flower surrounds itself with leaves and dainty buds.

She was not a young woman. She had indeed travelled quite far on the road that leads from youth to death.

It was even on record that a girl staying at the vicarage had alluded to her as an old lady.

Every one had started with shocked surprise. None of Anne Page's friends were accustomed to consider her age.

To them, she was just "beautiful Miss Page." In the same way, one never thought of analyzing her appearance, nor of criticizing her features. It would have seemed an impertinence. One felt vaguely that she would have been quite as lovely without any, for her beauty was like a rare effect of light that has no connection with the object it transfigures.

Certainly her face had the delicacy of a white rose. Certainly her eyes were blue; blue as cornflowers; blue as the sea. But they were Miss Page's eyes, and one instinctively compared them to lovely natural things.

She turned her head as the gate creaked.

Burks, in a frilled apron and a becoming cap with streamers, was hurrying up the path towards the sundial.

"There's a carriage coming up the drive, ma'am," she said.

"Thank you, Burks, I'll come."

The maid hastened back, her skirts ruffling the lavender borders, and, gathering up the filmy folds of her own gown, her mistress followed her.

At the gate, she turned for a last glance at the dying sunset sky.

On her way across the lawn, she noticed, with a thrill of pleasure, the beauty of the trees, motionless, dreaming in the dusk. White and slim in the half-light, the little fountain suggested to her a strayed nymph, transfixed with surprise and fear to find herself so near the haunts of man. Smiling at the fancy, Anne entered the drawing-room by one of the long open windows, and waited for her guests.

In a few moments, Burks admitted the Vicar and his wife.

The Reverend George Carfax was of the type already somewhat *vieux jeu*, of the muscular school of Christianity.

Good-looking, clean-shaven, bullet-headed, his appearance was rather that of a country squire than of a vicar of Christ. An excellent cricketer, hearty in manner, sound in health, he was nevertheless the ideal pastor for the rising generation of youths and maidens, whose muscles were possibly better worth developing than their souls.

His wife was the dowdy little woman, who inevitably by a process of natural selection becomes the mate of the muscular Christian.

In her first youth she had possessed the undistinguished prettiness common to thousands of English girls whose character, composed of negative qualities, renders them peculiarly acceptable to the average self-assertive man.

Now, at forty-five, in spite of her family of children, her figure was as spare and meagre as it had been at twenty, and the gown she wore, a black silk, slightly cut out at the neck, and trimmed with cheap coffee lace, was as dowdy as any of the dresses of her girlhood.

Miss Page walked with a charming dignity, her long gown moving over the floor with a soft *frou-frou* suggestive of silk, and cloudy concealed frills. Her appearance as she bent

towards the dowdy little woman, made a contrast almost ludicrous, if it had not also been somewhat pathetic.

Mrs. Carfax, innocent of contrasts and all they implied, took her hand in both of hers with an affectionate movement, and in the Vicar's firm handshake, and in his hearty words of greeting, the same evident liking for their hostess was expressed.

"Dr. and Mrs. Dakin," said Burks, at the door, and again Miss Page's smile welcomed the new-comers.

She particularly liked the tall thin man who entered. Dr. Dakin was a scholar and a dreamer, a man too unpractical by nature adequately to cope with a profession eminently practical. The doctor was only a partial success at Dymfield, where a man of the Vicar's stamp, genial, a trifle blustering, always cheerful, would have inspired more confidence than the dreamy medical man, who did not treat illness in the high-handed fashion unconsciously expected by his patients.

Only his success with one or two really serious cases in the neighbourhood preserved for him some measure of respect, and a general concurrence of opinion, that absent-minded as he appeared before the milder forms of ailment, when it came to graver maladies, Dr. Dakin

was presumably to be trusted. To no one was his lack of force and "push" a greater trial than to his wife, whose ambition for her husband had been a London practice, and for herself a smart amusing circle of acquaintances.

She was a pretty little woman of six or seven and twenty, with soft dark hair, and a slim figure. Endowed with all the nervous energy her husband lacked, she bore the traces of her discontent about her well-shaped mouth, and in the expression, exasperated and querulous of her brown eyes.

They softened into a wholly admiring glance however as they rested on Miss Page.

"My dear lady," she whispered, "that's the most lovely dress I ever saw in my life! Where *do* you get your things? And however do you manage to look so delightful in them?"

Anne laughed.

"Let me return the compliment. You look charming, Madge."

Mrs. Dakin blushed with pleasure, as she turned to shake hands with Mrs. Carfax.

"We are waiting for another guest," said Miss Page, sitting down in one of the big, chintz-covered chairs. "Monsieur Fontenelle, who, as I dare say you know, has just been

made President of the International Art Congress."

Dr. Dakin looked up quickly from the examination of an eighteenth-century fan, which he recognized as a new treasure in a cabinet filled with ivories, enamel snuff-boxes, old lace, old treasures of all kinds.

"Really?" he exclaimed. "That's most interesting. *The* Monsieur Fontenelle, in fact?"

"He's a very old friend of mine," said Anne.

"In England for the opening of the show next week, of course?"

"Yes. He's been staying for a couple of days at The Chase, and as he goes to London to-morrow I asked him to join us this evening."

To none of Anne's visitors but the doctor was the Frenchman's name significant.

Dymfield was not interested in the world of art. Very few of its inhabitants had ever heard of the International Art Congress, and even if they had, it would have conveyed nothing to their minds.

Nevertheless, a tremor of excitement and curiosity passed over the faces of Mrs. Carfax and Mrs. Dakin.

Strangers at Dymfield were rare, and a visitor who was staying at The Chase, as the

guest of Lord Farringchurch was on that account alone, a distinguished if not an alarming personality.

"A Frenchman!" exclaimed Mrs. Carfax. "I hope he speaks English?" she added below her breath.

"Oh, perfectly," Anne assured her, as the door opened.

"Monsieur Fontenelle!"

Burks, who had frequently accompanied her mistress in foreign travel, delivered the name with commendable swing and correctness of accent.

The man who entered looked considerably younger than his forty-seven years. Slight, still elegant in figure, his face possessed the distinction of clear-cut features, combined with an expression which only the charm of his smile saved from a suspicion of arrogance.

His hair, a little white on the temples, was thick and slightly wavy. His blue eyes, keen above a hawk-like nose, gleamed every now and then with a trace of irony; that irony which has become habitual, the recognized medium through which its possessor views the world. A shrewd observer would have guessed the character represented by such a face to be difficult and complex. Instinctively one knew that François Fontenelle would be no very

easy man to thwart ; one guessed also that he might be a man apt to form his own rules of conduct, to carve his own path in life, without too much consideration for the convenience or the paths of others.

As Miss Page rose and stretched out her hand, he stooped and kissed it with the graceful ease of manner natural to a Frenchman.

Mrs. Carfax felt quite embarrassed.

"So foreign," she thought ; the phrase expressing unconscious disapprobation.

"Glad *we* haven't those monkey tricks!" was her husband's half-formed mental exclamation.

Mrs. Dakin's heart gave a curious little flutter for which she could not account, except that she liked the manners of Frenchmen, and was for the moment acutely conscious of the dulness of life.

To her husband, the action suddenly recalled the days of Madame de Pompadour.

He glanced at the fan he still held, and his mind wandered to a book of that lady's period which he had long coveted, and had hitherto been unable to obtain.

Absorbed in reverie, he missed Miss Page's formal introduction, and was only recalled to the present day by the general movement following the announcement that dinner was served.

The dining-room at Fairholme Court, in the older part of the house, was a long, low room with casement windows, and carved beams supporting the ceiling.

In its midst the table sparkled with glass and silver, arranged with studied care between the shaded candles in sconces of Sheffield plate, and the crystal bowls of roses. It had the look of something exquisite, something in fact which belonged to Miss Page, and was marked with her individuality.

Mrs. Dakin made anxious notes. Her dinner-table never looked a work of art, and in the intervals of her study of, and speculations concerning Monsieur Fontenelle, she wondered why. Several times her glance wandered to Miss Page, whose eyes were bright, and whose faint pink colour was rather deeper than usual.

Did the Frenchman she wondered, represent Miss Page's romance? It was strange how little one knew about Miss Page. Nothing, in fact. Mrs. Dakin realized the fact for the first time with a little shock of surprise. But then one never expected Miss Page to talk about her own affairs. Quite naturally, inevitably as it seemed, one went to Miss Page for advice, for sympathy, for encouragement about one's self.

But this man must belong to the past life

of her hostess, whatever it had been—something charming, something gentle, since Miss Page had lived it. Of course she had been loved. She was too pretty not to have been loved. Had this man loved her perhaps? If so, why had they not married?

Mrs. Dakin roused herself, and began to pay attention to the conversation to which, so far, she had only contributed mechanical, unheeding remarks. Indefinitely she felt that it was on a higher level than usual; the sort of conversation to which Dymfield was unaccustomed.

The Frenchman talked with the vivacity the wealth of phrase and imagery common to his race, and Miss Page talked too, eagerly, fluently, leaning a little forward, as though enjoying a much-loved rarely indulged delight.

Dr. Dakin, roused at last from his dreaming, also sat upright, glancing from one to the other, throwing in now and again a question or a comment which was often seized upon appreciatively to form fresh material for conversation. Mrs. Dakin sat and wondered, mystified, scarcely comprehending. The topics over which the talk ranged, abstract subjects for the most part, illustrated by frequent references to books;—novels, French novels mostly, of which she sometimes just

knew the titles, philosophy of which she had never heard—belonged to a class of ideas which as yet had never appeared upon her mental horizon. She was interested, as well as overwhelmed, by a new view of her hostess. Miss Page, this brilliant conversationalist, this subtle reasoner, to whose words the Frenchman, himself so fluent, such an acute critic and thinker, accorded a deference so obviously spontaneous and sincere! Miss Page, who would spend hours in discussing the organization of a mothers' meeting, of a local flower show, of a Church bazaar. Miss Page, to whom one applied for recipes for *pot pourri*, for dainty invalid dishes, for remedies against chills. Miss Page, who suggested the fashion for one's new summer muslin, and cut out night-shirts for the children in the Cottage Hospital!

"How we must bore her!" was Mrs. Dakin's involuntary mental exclamation. "And how well, how delightfully she disguises it," was her next reflection.

She remembered other dinners at Fairholme Court—dinners at which the guests had discussed the new curate, the latest book of Miss Marie Corelli, the village cricket match, the fund for the new organ.

She remembered Miss Page's gracious

charm of manner on these occasions, her apparent interest in each of these trivial topics.

Even now, surprised, uncomprehending as she was with regard to most of the conversation, she did not fail to remark the tact which with a word, with a question easy to answer, she kept three of her guests, at least, ostensibly within the pale of the conversation.

"It's quite fair. We are evenly matched, to-night. Our stupidity has always outweighed her intelligence before, so she never had a chance," thought Mrs. Dakin. The bitterness of the reflection was caused by the conviction that it was ignorance, not lack of ability, which kept her, at least, out of discussions which interested her. Mrs. Dakin was one of those women whom mental laziness, not lack of brain quality, goes far to ruin. Her mind, naturally active and restless, was unemployed. She had never trained herself to think. To-night, with sudden self-recognition, she regretted both circumstances.

Harry, she noticed it with a curious sensation, half jealousy, half pride, was not out of the talk. He was no conversationalist, but he understood, he appreciated, he contributed. That his point of view was valuable, she knew by the brightening of Miss Page's eyes

when he spoke; by an occasional vivacious affirmative nod from Monsieur Fontenelle.

An idea, odd, staggering in its novelty, occurred to her.

“Perhaps I bore Harry?”

Never before had this aspect of affairs presented itself to her consciousness, and the notion passed like a flash.

The conviction that the exhausting mental ailment of boredom belonged by right to her alone, was too firmly established to be upset by a fugitive ridiculous fancy.

Again she listened.

The Frenchman’s eloquence and vivacity amused and excited her. He spoke rapidly, and though the words were English, pronounced with only the slightest foreign accent, their use, their handling was French.

Never before, for instance, had she heard any one utter at length a panegyric such as that to which she was now listening. It was evoked by the name of an author of whom she had never heard, and it was the sort of thing which in a book she was accustomed to skip. Spoken with the ease and certainty which indicated a natural habit of fluent speech, it amazed and impressed her.

Never before had she guessed that Miss Page was witty. Wit at Dymfield was not

understood; it was ignored, passed over in silence disapproving because uncomprehended. Quicker than her neighbours, Mrs. Dakin realized that in an argument on a play of Bernard Shaw's which Monsieur Fontenelle had recently seen in America, Miss Page was saying good things. In opposing his view, her raillery, delicate and ingenious, brought a frequent smile to his lips, and more than once an appreciative burst of laughter.

Mr. Carfax, who had never heard of Bernard Shaw, asked for the story of the play.

His hostess told it in a few words. That they were in every respect well chosen, Mrs. Dakin, who had also never read the works of the latter-day apostle, guessed from a faint smile of admiration, which at various points in the narrative lighted the Frenchman's face. Mr. Carfax nodded his head approvingly when she ceased.

"Very good, I should say. Full of common sense and right views. We want some one to elevate the stage; and I'm glad this man, what's his name? Ah! Shaw—is a Britisher. I believe in home-grown literature; something that expresses the character of the English people. A fine, sturdy character; the best in the world."

Miss Page rose without looking at Monsieur Fontenelle, whose smile, for greater safety, had taken refuge in his eyes.

Mrs. Dakin and Mrs. Carfax followed her into the drawing-room, and as though stricken with fear lest the dinner-table topics had resulted in dissatisfaction for her guests, she moved close to Mrs. Carfax.

"I saw Sylvia, to-day, looking *so* pretty," she began in her gentle, caressing voice.

Mrs. Carfax bridled, half pleased, half unwilling to accept a compliment on behalf of a daughter who was unsatisfactory.

"Looks don't matter so much as right behaviour," she returned. "She displeases her father very much with what he calls her advanced ideas. I don't know what they are, I'm sure, except wanting to get away from a good home. I wish you would speak to her, Miss Page. She thinks so much of you. You might bring her to her senses."

"Poor little Sylvia," said Miss Page, softly. "She's very young, my dear—and she's a sweet child at heart. Do ask her to come to tea with me to-morrow."

"I think your French friend is most interesting," remarked Mrs. Dakin, suddenly, putting down her coffee cup, and taking a seat beside Anne on the sofa.

Her hostess turned to her with a pleased smile.

"I'm so glad. You are always appreciative, Madge."

"I never heard any one talk like you two," continued Mrs. Dakin, slowly.

"I'm afraid we talked too much." The quick colour sprang to her cheeks. "I hope you weren't bored?" She included the two women in a swift, apologetic glance. "Talking too much is an old habit of mine, a habit of long ago, which revives when I see François. I——" she paused suddenly.

"I was never so interested in my life," said Mrs. Dakin, with such obvious sincerity that Anne's face cleared.

"Very clever, I'm sure. Very clever," murmured Mrs. Carfax. "Tell me, my dear, what shall I do about Emma? The girl gets worse and worse. She's no good at all as a parlourmaid. I've been thinking about her all dinner-time, and wondering whether I should give her notice, or whether——"

The entrance of the three men interrupted the heart-searchings of Mrs. Carfax.

Monsieur Fontenelle stood a moment just within the door. His eyes fell upon Mrs. Dakin, who sat in the corner of the sofa, her slender little figure in its white dress

showing to advantage against its coloured background.

A tremor of pleasure shook her as he drew up a chair of gilded cane, and leaning over the arm of the sofa, began to talk to her.

Mr. Carfax and Dr. Dakin, who both made simultaneously for Miss Page's corner of the room, were met by her with a little amused laugh, to which each responded.

"We can't *both* talk to her," declared Mr. Carfax, "because of course we each want her advice."

"I yield to you," said the Doctor, characteristically. "But you mustn't keep her too long."

"Time passes all too quickly with Miss Page," returned Mr. Carfax, with his hearty laugh. "I can make no promises."

"Do you really want to consult me?" asked his hostess, turning to him with her flattering air of undivided, interested attention.

"About many things. There's that case of Mrs. O'Malley's. It's really very difficult. Now, what would you advise?" He recounted at length a conversation he had lately held with the drunken old woman, on the circumstances of whose life, though upon this point she was silent, Miss Page's knowledge was considerably fuller than his own.

She listened thoughtfully, and suggested a different method of attack.

"Thank you," said the Vicar, his brow clearing. "I never thought of that."

"Anything else?" asked Miss Page.

"Oh well, yes; but I haven't time for that now. I must come some other day. I want to have a long talk with you about Sylvia. I can't make the girl out." He frowned. "She's so restless and discontented. I can't imagine why she doesn't settle down and be of some little assistance to her mother. The girl annoys me. I have no patience with the modern shirking of home duties."

"Dear little Sylvia!" repeated Miss Page. "She's coming to tea with me to-morrow. I always like talking to Sylvia. She's so pretty and charming."

Mr. Carfax looked a little mollified. "There's Dakin thinking I've overstepped my time-limit," he declared. "Come along, Dakin, your innings now."

The doctor approached Miss Page's chair, a smile on his long thin face.

"I only want you to show me your latest toys," he said, glancing at the cabinet. "I see you have one or two new things there."

She rose with alacrity, and in a few

moments they were bending over and discussing a piece of Battersea enamel.

Dr. Dakin, also an enthusiastic collector, was especially interested in the dainty trifles of the eighteenth century, which Anne too loved. It was a period which specially appealed to him, and the conversation passing from the frail things they handled—fans painted on chicken-skin, ivories, patch-boxes—soon extended to books, many of which he found Anne possessed.

Their conversation became engrossing, and Mrs. Dakin turned to her companion with a laugh.

"My husband is very happy," she remarked.

"No wonder," he returned. "Every one is happy with Miss Page."

"And she's so pretty, isn't she?"

"The most beautiful woman of my acquaintance," he replied gravely. "Because she has *acquired* her beauty—secreted it, in the same marvellous way that from hidden cells a rose draws its colour and its sweetness."

Mrs. Dakin glanced at him curiously. "It takes a Frenchman to say that. But it describes Miss Page," she added.

She hesitated a moment, curiosity very strong within her.

"You have known her a long time? Many years?" she asked.

"I first met sweet Anne Page twenty years ago, in this very house."

He smiled, a quiet reminiscent smile.

"And she wasn't young even then!" exclaimed Mrs. Dakin, involuntarily.

"Pardon me. Anne Page was always young, in the sense that the brooks and the hawthorn-trees and the roses are always young."

The smile was still on his lips, and Mrs. Dakin blushed.

"Oh yes, I know," she began hurriedly. "One never thinks of age with regard to her. I didn't mean that exactly."

"He must have been in love with her!" The idea ran into the undercurrent of her thoughts. "Perhaps he is still. It would be awfully romantic. And not absurd at all," she added, as a sudden mental supplement. "Sweet Anne Page is quite pretty."

Aloud, still impelled by irresistible curiosity, she went on asking questions.

"But this house didn't belong to her then, did it? We haven't been at Dymfield long enough, of course, but the old people in the village remember when Mrs. Burbage lived here."

"Mrs. Burbage! Yes, I'd forgotten. That was the name."

"It was quite a romantic story, wasn't it?" went on Mrs. Dakin, vivaciously. "You know it, of course? Miss Page was companion to old Mrs. Burbage for years before she died. She had a nephew, and naturally every one imagined that he would come into the property. But he displeased her in some way, and she left everything to Miss Page. At least, so I'm told. Is it right?"

Monsieur Fontenelle bowed. "I believe so." He laughed suddenly. "When I first knew the house, it was horrible. This beautiful room, for instance, was full of antimacassars and wool-work mats. The old lady had—how do you call it? Mid-Victorian—yes, Mid-Victorian tastes."

"Glass shades with wax fruits underneath, I suppose? Rep curtains and that sort of thing."

"Oh, *c'était affreux!*" he agreed, with a comic gesture of horror.

"How Miss Page must have enjoyed re-furnishing it! She has such exquisite taste, hasn't she? But the garden? The garden must always have been lovely."

"It was neglected. Mrs. Burbage was an invalid—fortunately. For the garden, I mean.

But Anne had begun to work her magic even then. The first time I ever saw her she had been planting roses round a sundial."

"Oh, in the lavender garden?"

"She took me there this morning. The rose hedge is very tall now, and the rose leaves were dropping down on to the sundial"—he stretched up his arm—"from a height like this, above it."

"Yes. Fairholme Court is the most beautiful place in the neighbourhood. Certainly the most beautiful place *I've* ever seen."

There was a moment's pause, during which Mrs. Dakin glanced towards the sofa, to which Anne had returned.

Her green and lavender gown fell in graceful folds round her feet. Against the cushions of dim purple at her back, her hair shone with a sort of moon-lit radiance. The poise of her head, the smile that wavered constantly near her sweet mouth, the radiance of her blue eyes, above all a certain dignity, too gentle to be quite stately, yet suggesting stateliness, made her a lovely and a gracious figure.

"Do you know," said Mrs. Dakin, suddenly, "what surprises me is that the people who knew her long ago, when she first came here, scarcely remember her. They say, 'Oh, she was a quiet creature. Very shy. We

scarcely noticed her. She was just Mrs. Burbage's companion.' Things like that, you know. It has often disappointed me. I should have thought she must have been so beautiful as a younger woman."

"She was always beautiful," said her companion, quietly, "to those who had eyes to see. But she has learnt to use her beauty. She had first to learn that she possessed it. That took her a long time." Again he smiled his odd little smile of reminiscence. "They are quite right when they say that she was shy. There are many people in the world, madame, who could be beautiful if they knew how. Beauty, the truest beauty, is an art. A subtle blend of many powers, mental and moral, which result in a mastery of the physical qualities. A knowledge of them, a perfect handling, a moulding of them to the ideal of the spirit. Do you remember what your critic Pater, says of *Mona Lisa*? It is a well-known passage, but it expresses what I am trying to say so poorly, so inadequately."

Mrs. Dakin shook her head. "I'm a very ignorant person," she said, with an embarrassed laugh.

"He is speaking of the portrait—which is lovely, according to the spirit rather than the flesh, and he says, '*It is a beauty wrought out*

from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries, and exquisite passions.'"

Mrs. Dakin wrinkled her forehead. The last words shocked her a little. Her plea of ignorance was a true one in every sense of the word. It was the plea of a woman who had passed most of her life with ordinary conventional people, as oblivious to the complexities of human life as to the world of ideas in art, in philosophy, in all the realms invaded by human thought and emotion.

If her existence was troubled, it was with the discontent of a child who cries for the moon which it regards as a pretty material plaything, rather than the trouble of a woman to whom the moon is a symbol of the rare, the exquisite things of life, which she weeps to find beyond her reach.

Yet her next remark pleased her companion.

"I think what you said about the rose describes her much better," she ventured, rather timidly.

He smiled. "You're quite right. I see you understand our sweet Anne Page. She doesn't belong to the *Mona Lisa* type. She's made up of all the beautiful natural things; of the sunlight and the roses, and the dew.

Tiens ! Don't say I'm ignorant of your poets. One of them has come rather near it when he says, '*And beauty born of murmuring sound has passed into her face.*'"

Mrs. Dakin had never heard the lines before, and hurriedly wondered how she could find them. She felt flattered, shy, and troubled at the same moment. It was rather a fearful joy to be talked to by this Frenchman, who was evidently so used to what she called "clever" people, that he quite naturally assumed her comprehension of his language. She wondered who *Mona Lisa* was, and half thought of asking Harry. It occurred to her that Harry read a great deal; that his study was lined with books into which she had never thought of looking. He never talked to her about them.

"I suppose that's because he thinks me too stupid," was her impatiently scornful reflection.

She was half relieved, half sorry when Mrs. Carfax, with a conventional exclamation upon the lateness of the hour, rose to go.

"Good-bye," she said, holding out her hand to her companion.

She hesitated, and then, shyness making the words a little brusque—

"If you are ever here again, I hope Miss Page will bring you to see us," she added.

"*Enchanté*, madame!" he returned with his easy bow and smile.

"Delightful fellow that!" exclaimed Dr. Dakin, as he stepped into the motor-car after his wife. He spoke with an animation unusual to him. "It's been a nice evening, hasn't it, Madge?"

"Very," she returned shortly, pulling the rug round her, and relapsing into silence.

She was thinking of the Frenchman's smile, and of his voice. He had beautiful hands, she remembered. Her husband looked at her and sighed a little. He would liked to have discussed the party, but Madge was in one of her moods, and he knew that the attempt would be useless.

"There's an air of unreality about foreigners," remarked Mr. Carfax, pulling up the window with a jerk, as the hired brougham turned out of the drive.

"Theatrical, rather—the way that fellow talked, wasn't it?"

"Quite absurd," agreed his wife. "I didn't listen. Miss Page is generally more interesting than she was to-night."

"Yes. Women do better as a rule, to keep to the subjects that suit them," announced the Vicar. "Not that Miss Page isn't a

clever woman, I believe. At least, Dakin says so, and *he* ought to know."

"I suppose this Monsieur—what's his name—was one of the friends she made when she was travelling?"

"I suppose so. She was away long enough to make shoals of them."

"You didn't know her, George, did you, when you were a young man?"

The Vicar shook his head. "I may have seen her once or twice when she was old Mrs. Burbage's companion. I had just left college then, and was at my first curacy in Nottingham—just before we were married, you know. I came back to the Vicarage once or twice in those days to see the old Dad, and I suppose she must have been at Fairholme Court then. But I don't remember her. She was nurse and general factotum to the old lady. Mrs. Burbage was an eccentric woman, you know; rather dotty towards the end, I believe. I can imagine that poor Miss Page hadn't much of a life with her."

"And then directly she had the place left to her, she shut it up and went away?"

"Yes. That must be nearly twenty years ago. How time flies!"

"I remember we came to the Vicarage just after she had gone, when Sylvia was a

baby; the year after your father died. It was a nine-days' wonder then. And I remember the people at The Chase saying what a piece of luck it was for such a dowdy quiet woman to come into a fortune."

"They can't say that now!" observed the Vicar.

"No. I never was so surprised in my life as the first time I saw her. That must be ten years ago now, George?"

"Yes. She was away ten years, and she's been back at the Court nearly the same time. That makes it about twenty years, as I thought. Dear me, it seems impossible!"

"She doesn't alter at all, does she? Her hair may have got a little whiter since I first saw her, but I believe she's prettier even. Well! Foreign travel must be wonderful if it can change a plain, dowdy creature into a woman like Miss Page."

"Money!" exclaimed the Vicar, sententially. "Money. It may be the root of all evil, but it's a great power—a great power, Mary."

"Mrs. Dakin's always very much overdressed, isn't she?" remarked his wife, as they approached the Vicarage porch.

"Yes. Foolish little woman that—foolish

little woman. Take care how you get out, Mary; the step is awkward."

The sound of a high sweet voice floated out upon the darkness, and Mrs. Carfax looked up sharply at a lighted window on the first floor.

"There's Sylvia singing!" she exclaimed in an exasperated tone. "She'll wake all the children. Run up and tell her to stop at once, George! Really, she is the most annoying girl I ever met."

II

LEFT alone for a few moments while his hostess was making her farewells in the hall, Monsieur Fontenelle sat still admiring the beautiful room, quiet now, its long windows open to the night and to the sound of the whispering trees.

Lighted by pink-shaded candles, its white panelled walls, its rose-patterned chintz curtains and chair-covers gave it an air of exquisite freshness and purity. Everywhere there were flowers. Roses glowed between the candles on the mantelpiece. China bowls filled with sweet peas, with pink mallows, with snapdragon, stood on tables, or on the top of Sheraton bureaux. Even the deep fireplace was filled with flowering plants.

Appreciatively, Monsieur Fontenelle glanced at the delicate workmanship of a Chippendale chair, noticed the graceful shape of a writing-table, and the beauty of an inlaid bookcase with a lattice-work of wood over its diamond panes. There were only one or two pictures on the walls, whose creamy surface made a

restful background to the colour in the room. Monsieur Fontenelle examined them. His quick eye detected a Corot, a tiny sketch of Whistler's, and then on the wall opposite to him, a landscape at the sight of which a peculiar brightness sprang to his eyes.

He crossed the room and stood looking at it. He was still looking at it when the rustle of a gown made him aware that Miss Page had come back.

Then he turned. She was standing just within the door, watching him, and in her eyes also there was the same curious brightness.

He looked at her a moment whimsically, without moving.

"You are a wonderful woman!" he exclaimed at last, speaking in French.

"Why?" she returned in the same language.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I leave that to the *bon Dieu* who made you. He's responsible, I suppose, for women of your type."

She smiled without replying.

"You tell me you're happy?" he asked.

"Quite happy, François."

Again he shrugged his shoulders. "Come, let us talk," he said, taking her by both hands and leading her to the sofa. "I only saw you for ten minutes this morning."

"Let us talk," she replied. And in French, "*Ça me fera du bien.*"

Instead of speaking at first, he looked at her.

"Anne," he exclaimed after a moment, "you are amazing! How do you manage it? You look younger than the day I first saw you."

"But I was old then," she returned, shaking her head—"very old. A woman who had done with life."

He answered her seriousness with a slow smile.

"Life had not done with you, had it?"

She did not reply, and with a change of voice, he said—

"So these are your neighbours."

"Some of them. They are dear people. I can't tell you half their kindness to me."

"It's not difficult to be kind to sweet Anne Page."

She gave him a quick glance. "It's nice to hear the old name again."

"No name ever suited a woman better. So you can live with the inhabitants of Dymfield without boring yourself to extinction? But of course you can. I never saw you bored."

"Boredom is a modern disease, isn't it? And you know I am not a modern woman."

"Thank God!" he exclaimed with fervour. "The little woman whose pretty head I've been puzzling all the evening, suffers from it terribly, though."

"Boredom? You're very quick, François. You always were. Poor little thing!" she added with a sigh.

"Why? Doesn't her husband amuse her?"

She shook her head. "No. It's one of those unnecessary tragedies of life. They don't try to understand one another. The material for happiness is all there, and they miss it. He's a dear fellow. Kind, and good; and a scholar too, as of course you discovered."

"Yes. You have one person at least with whom you need not talk in words of one syllable.

"Words of one syllable are often the sweetest."

He laughed. "You remind me of the lady from whose lips whenever she opened them, a flower fell. Your floors ought to be strewn with roses and violets by this time. But come! I don't want to discuss your neighbours. I want to talk about you. Do you know that in ten years I have only seen you three times? And you must have been through Paris very often. What have you to say for yourself?"

"Twice when I went to your studio you

were away. The last time, the *concièrge* told me you were with a lady."

"Well?"

"Well I didn't come up, of course."

He laughed. "Anne! You are the same Anne. So demure—so discreet."

"I thought you would have married by this time, François," she said after a moment.

He shook his head. "No dear Anne, you didn't. You know I am not the man to marry."

She returned his glance. "You are right," she answered quietly. "You have become such a celebrity François, that I ought to be afraid of you," she added.

His face changed. "I have become a popular painter, you mean."

"You are not satisfied?" She put the question softly.

He shrugged his shoulders. "One becomes what one is fit to become. I'm a lazy devil, Anne. It wasn't in me to bear the heat and burden of the day without my hire. I have learnt to give the public what it wants, and to laugh in my sleeve at its stupid shouting. The result is that in every paper the world is assured that I have achieved an international reputation. And next week I shall stand at the head of a staircase, solemnly shaking by

the hand, innumerable stupid people who know nothing, and care less about art, but have come because it is one of the functions of the season, to stare at the President of the International Art Congress. *Quelle farce !*"

He laughed a little. "It seems far enough away from that summer twenty years ago, when we all sat in that garden," he nodded towards the open window, "and talked of our dreams and our ambitions. Ah! we were going to revolutionize art, weren't we? We were going to bring the world to our feet like the young painters in *L'Oeuvre*, do you remember? The young painters who used to walk about Paris, talking, for ever talking, mad with hope and enthusiasm. And now? Henri is writing for *La Presse* . . . *Sacré tonnerre de Dieu*, as Lantier and Sandoz used to remark so frequently. What stuff! And how it pays! (Henri has a flat, Rue Malesherbes—Empire right through.) Paul has abandoned music, and is making vast sums on the Bourse, and I am President of the International Art Congress."

He paused.

"And René is dead," said Anne.

There was a silence. The lamp-lit room with its colour and fragrance was very still. To both of them, their minds filled with the scenes of other days, it assumed for a moment

an air of brilliant unreality, like a room seen in a dream. Outside, the trees whispered very softly.

"Whom the gods love——" began François.

He rose abruptly, and moved to the picture he had been examining when Anne entered.

"That's the real stuff!" he exclaimed. "God! how good it is! How did you get this?" he asked.

"I bought it."

He wheeled abruptly round. "Have you much of his work?"

"I bought all I could get. *The Bathers* and *The Forest* are in my room upstairs."

"Then France is the poorer by three masterpieces."

"France will get them back at my death."

"You have arranged that?"

She nodded. "They belong to his country, of course."

He came and sat beside her again. "I told you that the Luxembourg had bought my portrait of you?"

"Yes. Dear François the news gave me more pleasure than anything I have heard about you for a long time."

"It was to be my masterpiece, if you remember. They're quite right. I've never

done anything to touch it since. It belongs to my youth."

He saw that she was pale, and that her eyes looked sad.

"I've distressed you. I'm a brute!" he declared impulsively. "And we're not all *hommes ratés*, thank Heaven! Some of the men of the old Rue de Fleurus days are not to be despised."

"Thouret, Bussières, Giroux," murmured Anne.

"Yes; they have big names now. But after all Anne, it's you who have made an art of *life*. You're the only real success. You and René—who was wise enough to die," he added.

"Talk to me about Paris," Anne urged. "What is your new studio like? Very gorgeous, I suppose?"

"It's the studio of a popular portrait-painter. Now you know all about it."

"And the Duclos? And Georges Pasteurs?"

He began to talk gaily, while she questioned him, and they both laughed at reminiscences. There was no end to her eager inquiries.

"How you remember the people!" exclaimed François, presently.

"How can I forget?" she asked.

It was late when he rose to go.

"To-morrow, early I start for London, to prepare for the fuss of next week. I'm glad you won't be there, Anne."

His whimsical mocking smile met her as she raised her eyes.

"I should prefer you not to see your old friend playing the solemn fool."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well! One can't have everything, and I have five thousand a year. It's enough to make one comfortable."

"But not happy," she said gently.

"That, till forty, depends on one's temperament. Afterwards on one's dinner. I'm very happy to-night. Your cook was chosen with your usual discretion.

She laughed.

"You will be coming through Paris this winter?"

"Not to stay. Paris hurts me a little, old woman as I am. On my way back, in the spring perhaps."

He kissed her hand. "Most certainly in the spring. It's *au revoir*."

III

AN hour after her friend had gone, Miss Page sat by the open window in her bedroom. The room was full of moonlight, for she had put out the candles and drawn back the curtains.

Somewhere in the garden, or near it, a nightingale was singing.

Deep shadows lay across the lawn, and all the trees were dreaming. Far out, the meadows covered with a light mist, were like a mystic silver-flooded sea.

For a long time Anne did not move. Her long talk had revived memories. They crowded so swiftly to her mind that she grew bewildered, and as though impelled by a sudden impulse to seek relief, she rose and crossed the room to a tall bureau opposite the window.

Its interior revealed a number of pigeon-holes, and tiny cupboards with brass knobs. Pressing a spring under one of these, a deep drawer sprang open.

She felt in its recesses for a moment, and

presently drew out a book bound in a linen cover. Then lighting a candle and placing it on the table near the window, she resumed her seat.

In the quiet air the candle flame burnt clear and steady, and opening the book, Anne began to read a journal begun in her childhood. The volume was an ordinary thick exercise book such as schoolgirls use, and on the first page, in a large childish hand, was written—

*"Anne Page,
"Tufton Street,
"Dalston,
"London, 18—.*

"This is my birthday," it began. "I am twelve to-day, and I have made up my mind to keep a diary like Charlotte and Emily and Anne Brontë. At least I think they didn't exactly keep a diary. They wrote down what they were all doing at a certain time, and then four years afterwards, they opened their papers and compared notes. I think that was a good plan. But I shall write in my book once a year, on my birthday. So few things happen to me that I dare say that will be quite enough.

"As I have never written a journal before, I will say all I can remember about myself before this birthday. Perhaps if I don't, I shall have forgotten it by the time I'm old.

"I live at Dalston, and father is one of the curates at St. Jude's. Mother died when I was two years old, so I don't remember her. She left me her watch and chain and two bracelets. I have one brother Hugh, but last year he ran away from home, and went to sea. He ran away because he wasn't happy. Father was very strict with him. It is a good thing to be a boy, and be able to run away. I can't, because girls can't be sailors, and there's nowhere to run to. I miss Hugh dreadfully. He was fourteen, and he was very nice to me. I still cry about him sometimes at night. But it's no good.

"Our house is very ugly. It's in a street. It has a little back garden, but nothing will grow there because it's full of cats.

"I have a governess. Her name is Miss Atkins. She comes every day at half-past nine, and gives me lessons till twelve. Then we go for a walk. But there are no nice walks here. In the afternoon I do needlework, and learn my lessons for the next day, and Miss Atkins goes at six o'clock. She has corkscrew curls, and her hair is sandy like Thomas, our cat. She is cross every arithmetic day, because I can't do arithmetic. But she says it's because I won't, but that is not true. I like history and poetry, and all about the poets and writers.

And especially Shakespeare. Sometimes I read out of Lamb's tales for my reading lesson. I should like to read out of Shakespeare, but Miss Atkins won't let me. She says it isn't fit. I don't know why she says this, because I have found a Shakespeare in father's study, and some of it is beautiful. I like the *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. The Shakespeare is the only nice book in the house. Most of them are sermons, and about religion.

"I'm going to put a wicked thing in this book, so I must be careful always to lock it up. *I don't like religion.*

"Miss Atkins says she loves God, and I asked her whether father did. She was shocked, and said of course he did, because he was a curate. I wish he loved *me*, but I don't think he does. He is nearly always cross, and I'm always being punished."

Miss Page let the book fall on to her lap. Mechanically she turned her face towards the meadows with their islands of motionless trees emerging from the mists. But she did not see them. The childish words, already considerably more than forty years old, already a little yellow and faded, had brought into sight instead, the dreary house in Tufton Street.

With the clearness and precision of actual vision, she saw the narrow staircase covered with oilcloth, which led up to the bedroom in which she had spent so many hours of solitary confinement.

She saw the pattern on the shabby wallpaper. She saw her little iron bedstead, covered with a counterpane of thick white material, with a raised pattern upon its surface ; the curtains of dingy drab rep on either side of a red blind ; the outlook across a leaden street, swept by wind and rain.

She thought of her father, a morose, irritable man whose persistent bad temper, condoned to himself under the guise of necessary chastisement, had driven her brother from the house.

She remembered him in the clothes of his office, shabby and ill-cut, going doggedly about the duties which in later years she knew had been uncongenial.

Half reluctantly Anne took up the book again.

"I said that nothing ever happened to me. But one lovely thing happened last year. I went to stay at Dymfield, with Mr. and Mrs. Burbage. Mr. Burbage was some relation to my mother—a cousin, I think. Anyhow they wrote to father, and asked him to let me come.

Their house is called Fairholme Court, and it is a lovely house, only the furniture is ugly (except upstairs in some of the bedrooms, where Mrs. Burbage can't see it). Mrs. Burbage is very funny. She was kind to me, and I liked her rather, but not nearly so much as Mr. Burbage. I liked him better than any one I ever saw, though he doesn't talk much, but reads all day long. Perhaps that's what makes his eyes look so tired and sad. He has a lovely study full of books, and he let me read anything I liked. It was there that I read about Charlotte and Emily and Anne Brontë. They are very interesting, but I wish Emily had been called Anne, like me, instead of the youngest one. I like Emily best. And I read Hans Andersen too, and when I came away Mr. Burbage gave it to me. It is the loveliest book in the world. My favourite story is 'The Little Sea Maid.' Some day when I am grown up, I will go to places where there are orange trees, and marble palaces, and the sea is quite blue.

"My bedroom was so pretty. It was like a room in a fairy-tale. There was furniture with spindly legs in it; the kind of furniture Mrs. Burbage said was ugly and old-fashioned. But I thought it was very pretty. There were white curtains to the bed, and the wall-paper

had pink rosebuds on it, and the window was like a little door with lots of tiny panes, and it pushed outwards. There was clematis all round the window, and white roses which tried to grow into the room. In the morning I used to hear the birds chirping in their nests, and then I used to jump out of bed, and see the sun rising over the fields. And the garden was all shining with dew, and everything look *enchanted*.

"I was there a month, while Miss Atkins was away for her holiday, and I was *too* happy. But now I shall never go there again, because father has had a quarrel with Mr. Burbage. It was something about me, I think."

Her eyes still fixed on the round handwriting, Anne's memory was working.

Years later she knew that her old friend had once loved her mother, his cousin and play-fellow. At her father's death she had found, on going through his papers, the letter in which he had offered to provide for the child of the woman who would not be his wife. It was a letter full of tact and delicate feeling, but it indicated how much of the little girl's loneliness he knew and understood.

He pointed out that companions of her own age were necessary for the happy development

of her temperament. He wanted to educate her with some neighbour's children, so that she might live at Fairholme Court, in the country which she loved. She was not strong, he declared, and London air obviously did not suit her. There would of course be no attempt to separate her from her father. She could return to him during the holidays, whenever he wished to see her.

It was a letter written from full knowledge of the circumstances.

He knew the atmosphere of struggling poverty in which Anne, as the daughter of a curate with an income of little more than a hundred a year, passed her existence. He knew also that the man had little tenderness for his daughter, and he hoped that his suggestion might come as a relief.

Even at the age of twelve, Anne could have undeceived him.

Already, unable as yet to put her knowledge into definite form, she knew her father well.

Gloomy and morose, a man of narrow intelligence and invincible obstinacy, he resented any overtures which to his mind savoured of patronage.

In later years Anne knew the bitterness of his life.

The son of a rich stockbroker, he had just finished his course at Cambridge when the financial ruin, which killed his father, struck the death-blow to his own ambitions also.

He had been reading for the Church, with dreams, easy as it then seemed to be realized, of a splendid living, and a possible bishopric.

The girl to whom he was engaged, the daughter of an impoverished Irish landlord, was penniless.

She refused to give him up, and he married her, after taking orders, and entering the Church as a miserably paid curate. Together they settled in the dingy little house near the Church of St. Jude, at Dalston, to prove that love in poverty was a different matter from the same emotion experienced in affluence.

Henry Page was not strong enough to bear misfortune well.

His temper, naturally irrational and impatient of hardship—a temper which it would have required much material prosperity to soften, became soured and exacting under the stress of daily anxious necessity. Five years after their marriage, his young wife, crushed and saddened, gave up the struggle and died, leaving her two children in no very gentle hands.

The boy, determined to call his life his

own, had cut the knot of uncongenial family existence by flight.

Anne was left.

Miss Page turned over the leaves of the exercise book slowly.

On the whole, the child she remembered had kept her resolution fairly well.

"To-day is my birthday. I am thirteen. I am fifteen. I am seventeen." The words marking another year met her eyes constantly as she fluttered the pages. Several times there was a mention of Hugh. She had heard from him. He was getting on. He hoped some day to be captain of a trading vessel. He had sent her some funny writing-paper from Japan. Another time it was a pressed flower, or some curious seeds from the South Sea Islands.

Once—this was recorded after her seventeenth birthday—he had come home for a week.

"He is nineteen, and so brown and handsome and strong," was the remark in the journal. "He did not get on well with father. He told him that I ought to go away—that I had no friends, and that my life was very dull. Father was terribly angry. Now Hugh has gone, and I'm wretched—*wretched*. The house is so quiet. I can hear the clock in

the hall ticking even when I'm upstairs in my bedroom. It is raining, and the sky is like lead."

Anne still turned the leaves. There were big gaps in the journal, but if they had been filled, the word across the page would have been the classic *nothing* of the diary of Louis XVI.

In thought Anne went back over the long, dreary years—the incredibly empty years of a woman whom lack of means as well as lack of opportunity cuts off from the world.

A woman moreover, whose youth was spent under conditions less elastic, less favourable to development than those of modern days.

The cold bare nave of St. Jude's rose vividly in her mind. She saw the pews full of women in frowsy faded bonnets—the bonnets of Dalston.

She saw the parish room lighted by unshaded gas-burners, in which, shy as she was, she had held classes for work-girls. Again she watched them bending over their desks, giggling and nudging one another when she entered the room.

She remembered the look of the street when after the appointed hour for her class, she emerged from the stuffy room into the night air.

There was a butcher's shop opposite, with a row of flaring lights, and the butcher in a greasy apron used to stand upon the pavement shouting his wares to the hurrying passers-by.

Then there was the return to the dingy house. A hurried lighting of the gas in the entrance passage, the glare of which revealed the oil-cloth on the floor, growing more worn and shabby every year. How well Anne remembered what was left of the pattern of that oil-cloth !

A descent into the kitchen followed, where she prepared the supper, and directed the clumsy movements of Harriet, the little maid-of-all-work.

Supper then with her father, who sometimes scarcely raised his head from his plate, and seldom spoke a word.

Anne remembered one or two of the curates who had tried to make friends with her.

One of them who sometimes insisted upon walking back with her from her evening class, had hovered upon the verge of a mild flirtation. But to Anne, desperately shy and unused to the society of her fellow-creatures, his words were meaningless and embarrassing. Moreover, her father was unpopular. Frequently embroiled with his colleagues, none of them

sought his society, and none ventured to a house to which they were never invited.

In retrospect, she scarcely needed aid from the journal, Anne saw the years pass in grey procession. There was no note of revolt in the record of her girlhood's days, and the reading was the sadder for its absence. No revolt, no bitterness. Only a sad acquiescence with fate, a gradual numbing of sensation, a sort of mental and moral apathy, grey, leaden, hopeless.

She paused at the words which followed the announcement of her twenty-seventh birthday.

"Last week father was taken suddenly very ill. The doctor is afraid it is paralysis."

For three years there was no further word in the book, but Anne knew those three years by heart.

They were passed chiefly between the sick-room and the kitchen, in which she prepared invalid food, and directed the little maid in the management of the housework. Helpless as a child, her father required constant unremitting attendance, and when on the eve of her thirtieth birthday he died, Anne found herself literally penniless. The long illness had swallowed up his scanty earnings, and, unprepared for any work in the world, his daughter was left to face starvation.

Fastened inside the book was the letter which saved her.

It was written in the thin, quavering handwriting of an old woman even then ill and feeble. She opened and read it.

“Fairholme Court,
“February, 18—

“*My dear Anne,*

“*The news of your loss has just reached me. Before he died, my husband made me promise that if you were ever free, I would ask you to come to me. Will you come now? I am an old woman, and an invalid. In any case, before long I must have had a companion who would look after me, and nurse me when necessary. I cannot offer you a very cheerful home, but if you come you will be welcome.*

“*With sincere sympathy for the grief you have sustained,*

“*Believe me,*

“*Sincerely yours,*

“*JANE BURBAGE.*”

On the next page, the last written page in the book, Anne read these words :—

“To-morrow I go to Fairholme Court. It is eighteen years since I saw it. I am now thirty years old, and what I said as a child

is still true. Nothing has ever happened to me. Nothing will ever happen now. It is not surprising. I am very plain, and nothing happens to a plain woman who is also poor. I ought to be very grateful to Mrs. Burbage. She has probably saved me from starving. I *am* very grateful. But to-night I can't feel anything except that I don't care to go on living. If I were a religious woman I should think this sinful, but what I said as a child is still true. I don't like religion. I mean that it has never affected me. Never made me happy. Perhaps I have never yet found the religion to suit me. I don't know. To-morrow I begin a new life, but it will be again a life of nursing.

"I try to be grateful for a home. I try to feel cheerful. But all feeling seems to have gone. I remember my thoughts as a child. I was often very eager then, and hopeful. I was often sure in my heart that something delightful would happen to me. But now nothing seems worth while, and I am only very tired. Perhaps when I feel better I shall be glad that Fairholme Court is beautiful and in the country. To-night even that doesn't matter.

"Hugh wrote to me after father's death. He has saved a little money, and with

another man, a friend, he is going to start a sheep farm in New Zealand. He is engaged to be married to a girl he met on one of his voyages. She has since returned to England, and they will have to wait till he has made a home for her before they can marry. But he seems full of hope, and is very happy.

"I am chiefly thankful for Mrs. Burbage's invitation, because now I need not be a burden to him. As it is, he has sent me money which he can ill afford, though without it I could not have existed during the past few months. He wanted my photograph, and, to please him, I had it taken. The other copies will be wasted. There's no one else in the world who wants my picture. All my things are packed. This is the end of my life here. I wish it were the end altogether."

A photograph, one of the wasted copies, was placed between the leaves, at the last written page.

Anne took it up, and examined it by the light of the expiring candle.

She saw a sad quiet face, with thick hair parted smoothly on either side of the forehead. It was a face which looked older than the one now bent over it. A disfiguring gown, fastened with a little tucker at the neck, concealed the

long line of the throat. Except for the indication of a clear cut chin, and a mouth sweet, despite its sadness, there was no beauty, not even a suggestion of grace or charm in the picture.

Anne replaced the photograph, and slowly shut the book.

There was a look of terror on her face. She had called up a ghost—the ghost of her past self.

Like a woman whose one idea is flight, she half rose, and for a moment glanced with frightened eyes about the room.

Dawn was breaking. The eerie, grey light showed her the embroidered linen coverlet on her bed, the spindle-legged dressing-table which had once stood in the little white bedroom upstairs, the flowered curtains at the window, the bowl of sweet peas on the table at which she had been sitting.

She drew a deep breath, and moved close to the window.

The air thrilled with the voices of the birds. The trees were still motionless, as though waiting for the sun; and grey with dew, the meadows stretched away towards the dim horizon. In the rose-garden on the right, beneath the sheltering wall, the sun-dial glimmered white as pearl in the dawn-light.

The candle flared up, and went out with a flicker.

Anne turned, and groping her way in the half light, replaced the book in the drawer, and touched the spring which closed it.

IV

AT four o'clock, Sylvia Carfax swung the gate of the Vicarage garden behind her, and stepped into the dusty road.

It was nearly a mile to Fairholme Court, and the sun blazed in a sky of cloudless blue, and beat upon her shoulders protected only by a blouse of thin muslin.

Sylvia was just twenty, tall slim, and, as Miss Page suggested very pretty.

In her own mind Anne often wondered when she looked at the girl's rich black hair, which made such a striking contrast to eyes blue as the sky, that from the shelter of the Vicarage and all it represented such a southern, opulent type of beauty should have emerged.

To reach her destination Sylvia had to walk through the village, past the blacksmith's, and past the baker's shop, with its quaint carving over the entrance porch.

Dymfield was an ideally beautiful village, to which even the doctor's motor-car scarcely

brought more than a hint of the rush and hurry and ugliness of much of modern life.

In the gardens of the thatched cottages, summer flowers made a blaze of colour. Roses and honeysuckle clambered over porch and roof.

The church, resting peacefully in the green sea of the churchyard, was like some great rock, stained with lichen, crumbling with age, beautiful in its decay.

Near it, under the shade of mighty elms, was a row of almshouses, fine specimens of black-and-white work, and at the end of the rambling street stood the old well, with its canopy of wrought iron, and its ancient moss-grown steps.

As she passed through the village in which from babyhood she had lived, Sylvia recognized its beauty and its peace. It seemed a place where it was always afternoon, and for that reason, to the girl who yearned for the morning, herself in the glad confident morning of life, it was intolerable.

She gave herself an impatient little shake, and hurried on.

Now, across the green, the beeches of Fairholme Court were in sight.

In summer they almost completely screened the house, and made deep shadows in the

drive. Thankfully Sylvia plunged into the shade and quickened her steps.

The hall door was wide open, revealing the coolness of the white-panelled hall, and as she entered, the air was sweet with the scent of flowers.

She stopped a moment to bend over a great bowl of sweet peas.

"Everything is peaceful here too," she thought. "But it's interesting as well. I wonder why?"

The appearance of Burks, immaculate as usual in snowy cap and apron, interrupted her vague musing.

"Mistress is upstairs in her sitting-room. I'll tell her you're here, miss."

"Thank you Burks, she expects me. I'll go up."

The maid disappeared, and Sylvia ran up the shallow stairs to the first floor, and knocked at a door on the right.

"Ah! my dear child!"

Anne half rose from a couch which was placed close to the window.

The matting blinds outside were half drawn to keep out the glare of the sun, and the room was filled with a light soft and green, as though it had filtered through a canopy of leaves. Beneath the blinds one caught a glimpse of

one of the rose-gardens. Protected by a yew hedge, roses of all colours lifted their sweet, hot faces to the sun. A grass path running down the middle of the garden ended at a white seat, in a bower of white blossom.

Sylvia drew a deep breath. "I believe all the delicious scents in the world are here!" she exclaimed.

"That's why I like this room in the afternoon," said Anne. "The sun draws all the sweetness out of the roses, and sends it up here. Take off your hat, my child. You've had a tiring walk, I'm afraid."

"I'd walk twenty miles in the sun to find you at the end of them," declared Sylvia, vehemently.

Anne laughed, as she got up and rang the bell for tea.

Her white wrapper of cambric and lace trailed after her as she moved. Sylvia touched it with reverent fingers.

"You look so sweet in these things," she said.

"I ought to have changed my gown properly to receive you. But I was reading, and too lazy to move."

Sylvia picked up the book which lay on the sofa.

"French, I see by the yellow cover." She

began to turn over the leaves, and suddenly laughed.

"How like you to have a rose-leaf for a book-marker! *I* should put in a hairpin, or something equally ugly. I wish I could read French easily, then you would lend me all your books, wouldn't you, Miss Page?"

"Not all of them," returned Anne, smiling.

"Why not? I'm sure *you* haven't got stupid ideas about proper reading for young girls, and all that sort of thing," declared Sylvia, petulantly.

"I've got ideas on the subject, stupid or otherwise. Tea, please Burks. We'll have it up here. And bring the pink tea-service. It goes so nicely with this room," she explained to Sylvia in parenthesis.

"Do tell me why you wouldn't lend me all your novels?" the girl persisted.

"Because certain books my dear are of no use to us till life makes them intelligible. And life can only be learnt by living it."

"I wish I'd lived it then," protested Sylvia.

"Oh Sylvia, there's time enough. Don't wish that," returned Miss Page, quickly. She bent forward and took the girl's hand. "Don't wish your youth away. It goes so fast in any case. And it should be the most beautiful part of one's life."

"*Should be!*" replied Sylvia, passionately. "But is it? What's the good of my youth to me, here in this dull little hole? I'd give the world to be like you, Miss Page. You're not—not quite young, perhaps——"

"My dear, I'm almost an old woman."

Her smile was wistful, though it was touched with amusement.

"You'll never be that!" returned Sylvia, vehemently. "And anyhow, you're lovely, and every one adores you. And you lead your own life and make it beautiful. And I'm perfectly certain that you *have* had everything I want. Except that you're not married. I suppose I shall want to be married some time or other. But, then, as you didn't marry it must have been because you didn't want to. Hundreds of men must have been dying to marry you. I'm sure hundreds are dying now——"

"What an awful picture of carnage!" interrupted Anne, laughing, as Burks appeared with the tea.

"What a *lovely* tea-service!" Sylvia exclaimed, taking up one of the Sèvres cups gently to examine it. "But then everything of yours is lovely. This room is as perfect as the drawing-room, and I think I like it almost better. I love the white matting on

the floor, and these green-and-white chair-covers and curtains. And I love a room lined with books. What a lot!"

She began to walk round examining them. "But heaps of them are French ones, so you needn't be afraid," she added mischievously. "Oh, and Italian too! Do you read Italian, Miss Page? Really? I ought to be afraid of you. You're so awfully clever. I believe you keep everything you love best up here, don't you? The pictures now—I don't understand pictures, but I like the colour of these. This room seems more *you* than all the rest of the house. Though it's all like you in a way."

"I only receive my *special* visitors up here."

Anne's smile flattered and touched the girl.

She slipped down on to the sofa beside her friend, and moved close to her with a caressing movement, as she took the tea-cup from her hand.

"These cakes were baked expressly for you, so you must do them justice. Really cook makes them very prettily, doesn't she? They're rather like the cakes in *Goblin Market*. Do you remember how the sisters

'*Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat,
Cakes for dainty mouths to eat?*'"

She passed them to Sylvia in their silver basket, over the rim of which fell a d'oyley of fine lace and linen.

Sylvia shook her head. "I don't know anything!" she exclaimed. "I shall never know anything if I stay here. Oh Miss Page, *do* help me to get away! You can do anything with father. Please persuade him that I ought to go. You know how it is at home. I'm not really wanted. We're quite comfortably off, and there are enough servants to do the work without *making* work for me, to try to keep me quiet when I'm aching to go and make my own life!"

She pushed her cup away from her with an impatient movement.

Anne waited a moment. "It's still the music, I suppose?"

"Yes. I *have* got a voice. I know I could do something with it. And you see they don't understand. Mother says I can take lessons from Miss Rowe at Dorminster. *Miss Rowe!*" She laughed derisively. "And father says if I sing well enough to please them at home, and to lead in the choir, what more do I want? They expect me to trot round with mother on her district calls, when I'm really only in the way. Mother *likes* doing it. She wouldn't give up her work to me even if I

wished it. And I'm supposed to do needle-work for the children, when poor Mrs. Jones down the village would be glad of it, and ought to have it. And they think I'm awful and ungrateful not to be quite happy with tennis parties and flower shows for my amusement! Oh Miss Page, don't you think to be a daughter at home, with no money, at the mercy of your parents, unable to get away, is just like being a slave?"

She poured out the words passionately. Her hands were shaking, her eyes full of tears.

Anne looked at her, and a wave of comprehension and pity passed over her heart.

The girl's incoherent words were echoes; they touched painful memories of years for her, long past.

She recognized the despairing cry of youth, articulate in these modern times, no longer stifled as in the days of her own girlhood.

Youth, fettered, struggling with passionate clamour to be free.

She recognized the revolt of a temperament unsuited to its environment, bound by a tyranny no less stifling because it was unconscious and even loving.

She rose, and began to walk about the room, conscious of the modern spirit, accepting it as inevitable, and in spite of all the

misery it involved, right in its essence, a necessary step towards the just claim for individual liberty.

Sylvia watched her hungrily, like a prisoner who has staked his existence on the goodwill and clemency of a ruler.

"I will do what I can, Sylvia," she said at last. "I will speak to your father. I think you ought to go."

The girl's face grew radiant. "Oh, you're an *angel*!" she cried. "What should I do without you? Speak to him soon, Miss Page!" she implored. "I can't bear it any longer. I really can't. I get on so badly with father now, and with mother too. I can't help it. I know I've got an awful temper, but they irritate me so, and——"

Anne sat down beside her on the sofa. "I will speak to your father," she repeated. "But, my dear, I know it's a hard, perhaps almost an impossible thing to ask you, but try to see your parents' point of view as well as your own. They *have* one, you know," she added, smiling. "One that belongs to their age and the traditions of their education. To them, though you don't believe it, their standpoint is as important as yours to you."

"But you think mine is right?" demanded Sylvia, breathlessly.

Miss Page laughed. "For you, yes. But I'm sorry for your people."

"I believe you're sorry for every one," said Sylvia, after a pause.

"There's a tendency to get sorrier for most people as one gets older, I admit. You must bear with me, Sylvia."

The girl flushed. "Now you're laughing at me," she said.

"No. Only remembering how I felt at your age, and being very sorry for you too."

"Ought I to see every one's point of view as you do?"

"You couldn't. It's not to be expected of you. And after all, it's right that you shouldn't. It's the young who make history, and history is made by seeing one thing at a time to the exclusion of every other consideration. It's only in the autumn of life that one has time to be sorry. But still my dear, you can be kind even without comprehension. Remember the immortal remark that our parents are fellow-creatures after all."

She looked at the girl whimsically, and Sylvia laughed.

"How angry father would be to hear you say that!" she cried. "But you wouldn't say it to him, of course," she added.

"You know it's only nonsense; and there's such a thing as tact, my dear."

"I know," sighed Sylvia. "I haven't got any."

"That's another of the things that comes with age."

"All the nice things come with age, I believe."

"Well, age should have *some* compensations," returned Anne, gaily.

"You have *all* of them," Sylvia declared. "All the pretty things that generally belong to girls, and all the interesting things that ought to belong to women. It isn't fair. You know how to talk to every one. I should *love* to hear what you say to father. It would be too amusing! Mrs. Dakin came in this morning, and said you were wonderful with the Frenchman who dined here last night. And the way you talk to Dr. Dakin is quite different from the way you talk to father. And of course, you're quite different with me again. You always remind me of that verse in the Bible about being all things to all men!"

"You're really a terrible young woman!" was Miss Page's reply. "Go and sing me something. It's the only way to stop you from proving me a monster of duplicity."

"No, no," urged Sylvia, eagerly. "You

only speak to people as they can understand. But the wonderful thing is, that you know by instinct exactly what they *will* understand, and exactly how to say it."

"Go and sing," repeated Anne.

Sylvia went laughing to the piano. "I feel awfully happy. I must think of something that suits."

She considered a moment, and then broke into a gay little love-song, with a charming refrain.

Anne listened, and as she listened, her determination grew. Sylvia was right. She must go. Her voice was worth cultivating, even at the price of parental displeasure.

"Thank you dear," she said as the clear, ringing notes ceased. "I feel as though a nightingale with brains had been kind enough to fly into my room."

"What else would you like?" Sylvia turned her head as she sat at the piano, playing rippling notes with her left hand. The cloud had left her face, and her parted red lips were very sweet.

Anne hesitated a moment. "You read music easily, don't you? I wonder whether you could sing me a little French song?"

She got up, and opening a cupboard in the wall, began to turn over some papers.

"Here it is," she said at last.

Sylvia left her place, and knelt beside her friend's chair, taking the music from her hand.

There were some words upon the cover, but they were in French, and in a difficult handwriting.

Anne opened the page rather quickly. "You see it's quite short and quite simple," she observed.

"Let me read the words first, and you must correct my pronunciation."

She began to say the lines a little falteringly, but her quick ear soon found their lilt, and she read them well.

"How pretty ! They're quite easy words. I can understand them," she said, going to the piano again. "Who wrote them ?"

Anne did not answer, and Sylvia, engrossed in trying the accompaniment, forgot her question.

"I see how it goes !" she exclaimed, playing the first bars. Involuntarily, as she began the first bar, Miss Page put out a quick hand as though to stop her, but the girl sang on unconsciously, and the hand dropped at her side.

"It's lovely !" Sylvia cried, playing the last notes softly over again.

'Thank you, dear,' said Anne, gently.

She had crossed the room, and was trying on her garden hat.

With one hand she gathered up the folds of her long gown.

"The sun is off the roses now, and I'm going to give you some to take home to your mother. Come out and help me pick them."

V

DR. DAKIN'S house stood in the village street. It was a plain Georgian dwelling of a type common to every English country town; a type which admirably combines comfort with a certain homely dignity.

It was covered with ivy, carefully trimmed where the rows of square-paned windows broke the front, and its long, narrow door was surmounted by the conventional classic design of skulls and garlands.

As Miss Page crossed the road towards the post-office one morning late in September, Mrs. Dakin tapped at the window of the breakfast-room, and then ran to the door.

Anne smiled as she crossed the threshold. "Why, Madge, what is it? You look radiant, my dear!"

"I am. I mean I feel radiant. Come in. Do come in. I want to tell you."

Her voice shook with suppressed excitement, as Anne followed her across the stone-flagged hall to a room on the right.

"I'm going to Paris for a long visit!" she exclaimed, drawing up a chair for her friend close to the window. "What do you think of that?"

"I didn't know you had friends in Paris."

"Oh yes. Didn't I ever tell you about Helen Didier? She was one of my school-fellows at the convent near Tours, where I went for a year. She married a Frenchman."

"And she lives in Paris?"

"Yes. I haven't seen her for ages—scarcely once since we both married. But I took it into my head to write to her a week or two ago, and just fancy! You'll be awfully interested. She knows Monsieur Fontenelle quite well. Her husband is a friend of his."

Anne looked up rather quickly. "Really?"

"Yes. Isn't it strange? I happened to mention him when I wrote to her, and she knew all about him. She would, naturally, as he's such a great man; but it's awfully exciting that he should be a friend, isn't it?"

"What does Harry say?" asked Anne.

"Oh, he doesn't mind. He says it will do me good to have a change."

"He will miss you horribly, my dear."

She shrugged her shoulders. "He's so busy, you know. And when he's at home, he's always buried in his books. Besides, he

knows I must have a change. My nerves get worse and worse, and I'm always having neuralgia. I sleep badly, too."

"You mustn't look so brilliant, then," returned Anne, laughing. "You'll be considered a fraud."

"It's nothing but joy," Madge declared. "You know I've never been to Paris. And just think of getting out of this hole for two or three months, perhaps. I could scream with excitement at the bare idea!"

"When do you go?"

"Next month. I shall be awfully interested to meet Monsieur Fontenelle again," she added. "He's so clever, isn't he? I'm rather afraid of him. I envy you for getting on with him so well."

Anne smiled.

"Why has he never been to see you before?"

"He's not often in England now, though he travels a great deal, and is very cosmopolitan."

"How on earth has he learnt to speak English so perfectly?"

"He has English relations—Lady Farringchurch is one of them. And as a young man he studied over here with a friend. But in any case he's a wonderful linguist naturally."

"What interesting people you must have

met!" exclaimed Madge, looking rather curiously at her visitor. "I suppose you met him during all those years you were travelling? I often wonder how you stand this miserable little dead-and-alive place. You must have had such an exciting life."

Anne did not reply for a moment.

"My dear," she said at last quietly, "when you come to my age, your garden, your books, and your friends make a very pleasant haven before you set sail."

"And your memories, I suppose?" Madge glanced again swiftly at her friend.

"And your memories—yes," Anne repeated.

"I shall have none," declared Madge, restlessly. "None that count."

Miss Page was silent. "Oh! I know you think me an ungrateful wretch!" she broke out, leaning back in her chair and tapping her foot impatiently. "Harry's very good and all that. But I'm so *bored*. I'm bored from morning till night. When I get up every morning I think—'Here's another dull day, what on earth shall I do with it?' And sometimes it doesn't seem worth while to get up and go on."

Anne watched her as she stared moodily into the narrow trim garden, discontent and

listlessness plainly expressed by her eyes and drooping mouth.

She was a woman loved faithfully and with infinite tenderness. If she had allowed them expression, Anne's reflection would have been translated by a smile and a sigh, both of them utterly unintelligible to the little woman at her side. Both of them were therefore repressed.

"Well!" she said aloud. "I hope you'll have a very gay time. I'm very glad for you, my dear. Go and be happy. Where does your friend live?"

"Over by the Parc Monceau, wherever that is. *Do* tell me what it's like?" she begged, all animation again.

Anne stayed a few minutes longer, talking about Paris, and then rose to go.

Mrs. Dakin kissed her affectionately. "I wish you were going with me. I shall miss you horribly!" she declared.

She followed Anne to the door, and stood a moment, waving and smiling as her friend crossed the street.

All the bored discontent had vanished from her face, and her husband, who at the moment drove up in his car, thought she had never looked prettier.

The reflection was accompanied by a curious

dull pain at his heart, a pain to which he was well accustomed.

"I'll drive you home," he called to Miss Page, stopping his car at the opposite pavement.

"So Madge is going to Paris?" she said, as they swept off.

"Yes. I hope it will do her good," he returned shortly. "She complains of neuralgia. Perhaps a change will set that right. I hear the little Carfax girl is going to London to study this autumn?" he added after a moment. "She's off her head with delight about it. That's *your* doing, of course."

"Well, I suggested it to her father," Anne admitted.

He laughed. "We all know your suggestions. When a witch 'suggests,' mere man is instantly hypnotized. Poor old Carfax can do nothing now, but put his hand in his pocket and produce the necessary fees."

Anne smiled. "Come in and look at my hollyhocks," she said, as they turned into the drive. "They're really worth seeing."

The doctor followed her through the house and across the lawn into one of the walled gardens. "How gorgeous!" he exclaimed, as she opened the gate.

The enclosure was a blaze of colour. Wine-

red, white faintly flushed with pink, yellow soft as a sunset sky, the flowers stood close together in stately rows.

Behind them, on either side of the dividing grass path, masses of phlox, white and rose and crimson, continued the wave of colour till it was arrested by the enclosing walls.

"Look at the butterflies," said the doctor, instinctively lowering his voice as though he feared to disturb them.

They hovered in numbers above the silken cups of the hollyhocks. On the sulphur-coloured petals of one of them, a Purple Emperor, motionless, extended his splendid wings. Here and there, dazzling in fairy armour of peacock-blue and sheen of silver, darted a dragon-fly.

"The colour of the thing is intoxicating," murmured Dr. Dakin.

"It reminded me this morning of an elaborately arranged 'sensation' scheme, planned by that madman in *A Rebours*. Only of course, he would have despised such a homely natural flower as the hollyhock."

The doctor smiled. "What a curious anomaly you are here, my dear lady!" he declared suddenly. "And yet that's not true either, because you also suit the place to perfection. Huysmans, and a country practice,

and Carfax—and you! It's an amazing world. I hope some intelligent Being doesn't miss the exquisite humour of many human juxtapositions," he added rather drily.

"I'm glad Sylvia's going to study," was Miss Page's somewhat irrelevant reply. "She has a beautiful voice."

"Quite remarkable," he agreed. "She'll be a difficult young woman though, if that face of hers means anything. I don't know that you haven't thrown her to the lions."

"My dear doctor, isn't it better to meet the lions, and take one's chance, than to be preyed upon by restlessness and discontent till the whole of one's character is worm-eaten?" asked Anne, quietly.

The doctor stooped to examine the Purple Emperor which still lay motionless, basking in the sunshine.

When he raised his head Anne saw the trouble in his eyes.

"Perhaps you're right," he said. Then abruptly, after a moment, "I wish I could give Madge the life that would suit her!" he exclaimed, jerking out the words awkwardly.

Miss Page waited a moment. "What do you think *would* suit her?" she asked gently.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "She wants to live in London, you know. She

wants a gayer life. But I should be no use in town. I shouldn't make a living even. I haven't the manner. It's as much as I can do to hold my own here."

"Every one who knows you, ends by being thankful to find a splendid friend as well as an excellent doctor," returned Anne.

The bitterness in his face softened. "If all the world were like you," he began with a little laugh, and paused. "I'm glad they're not, though. There must only be one Miss Page. But that's it," he went on, "I must know people well—better than one could ever know them in the rush of a London practice, where the polished manner I don't possess is absolutely necessary."

There was a silence, while they walked the length of the grass path together.

"I ought never to have married Madge," he broke out at last, in a low voice. "She's too pretty, and too gay by nature, for a slow coach like me. This village life is too dull for her. She wants her dances, her theatres"—he made a vague gesture—"all that sort of thing. I can't make her happy."

There was a note of sad discouragement in his voice which went to his listener's heart.

"I think you could," she said.

He turned his head sharply. "How?"

The involuntary hope died. He shook his head. "She's bored with me."

"Partly I think, because she imagines you are bored with her."

He started. "*I?* Bored with Madge?" He stopped, as though suddenly arrested, and stood staring down at the grass. "I—I don't think you understand how much I—care for Madge. She's the only woman I ever wanted to marry. I——"

His voice failed. Miss Page saw that his face was working.

"I *do* know. Better than any one, perhaps. But I don't think you understand her."

He looked at her mutely, waiting for her next words.

"You think of her as a butterfly, don't you? A woman with no brains, perhaps? Oh! I know," she interrupted, as he made a gesture of protest. "I know that would make no difference." She smiled a little. "A man doesn't want the woman he loves to have brains. But they are useful sometimes. In her case they may be very useful. She would like a life of gaiety, of course. She's young and pretty, and it's only natural. But she can't have it. Very well then, if she were nothing but a butterfly, her lot—and yours,

would be hard. But Madge has a mind. Oh, she's ignorant, of course! She says so herself. She never reads. She never thinks. But that's habit. No one has ever taken any trouble with her. Did you notice how interested she was the evening we were really talking — the evening Monsieur Fontenelle dined here? She was proud of you then. She wished she could take part in the conversation. Her mind is empty because she has never troubled to fill it. But it's a mind of good quality. She has the power to be interested in a thousand things. You could open a new world to her, if you were careful — and had a little tact. And we all know that you possess that admirable quality!"

The flattery of her smile was not lost upon the doctor.

Surprise, involuntary hope, gratitude, admiration, all struggled in the look with which he regarded her.

"You always say the right thing," he declared simply. "I didn't know the child——" He paused, but there was a look of sudden tenderness in his eyes. "Well! she's going away now," he began.

"And that's such a good thing," interrupted Miss Page, eagerly. "She will hear and see so much to interest her. She will

come back with new impressions. You will have something to work on."

They strolled out of the garden together, and across the lawn without speaking.

"Good-bye," said the doctor, starting as though from a deep reverie, as he found himself opposite his car.

He pressed her hand warmly. "You have made me much happier," he added shyly.

"But don't forget to tell her very often that you love her, and that she's the prettiest thing in the world!" Miss Page admonished him, with a laugh. "There are remarks which never bore a woman, however many times they are repeated. Those are two of them."

VI

THE midday post had come while Miss Page and the doctor talked in the garden.

As she passed through the hall after the motor-car had disappeared, Anne found her letters lying upon the table.

She turned them over, and lighted with satisfaction upon one with a foreign postmark.

Her correspondence with François Fontenelle—a correspondence of fifteen years' duration—had never ceased to be a pleasure to her.

She picked up his letter, and went through the inner hall into the garden, to the seat under the beech tree.

Several things on the first page made her laugh. François was evidently in a gay mood when he wrote. He had more work with portraits than he could get through. He described his sitters with the light raillery he managed so well, presenting them to his reader with a felicity of phrase, a touch as skilful and clever as she well knew the portraits themselves must possess.

It was better to be François Fontenelle's friend than his enemy, Miss Page reflected, and smiled to remember the rash women who now crowded to his studio, anxious to be painted by the popular if distinguished artist.

She guessed how many of them winced in secret at the result, and marvelled that fashion, as well as religion, should exact its willing martyrs.

"*I hear,*" he said towards the end of the letter, "*that I'm likely to renew my acquaintance with your little friend, Mrs. Dakin. By a strange chance, the wife of a friend of mine, Louis Didier, knew her as a school-girl—went to school with her, I think; and she has been asked to visit them. Louis Didier is a good fellow—an architect. No. You never met him. I have known him myself only two or three years. He belongs to the younger generation. C'est un bon garçon, though his work is mediocre enough. I don't like his wife. I suspect her of being what you in England call a cat, though to me she is amiable enough. I may possibly have struck terror into her feline heart. When you are in Rome I want you to go again to the Farnesina Palace, and look at the Correggio. You know the one I mean?*" The letter ended with talk about pictures.

Anne read it to the last word, and then

sat with it still unfolded in her lap. Her eyes were fixed on the drooping branches of the beech under which she sat.

Its leaves were already yellow, and it rose like a fountain of gold towards the quiet September sky. All round the eaves of the house the swallows were skimming and crying, in the unrest of an imminent parting, and the hazy sunshine wrapped the garden in a dream of peace.

Anne too, sat dreaming. Ever since the visit of her friend, earlier in the summer, her thoughts had developed a tendency to wander back over the years before their meeting.

To-day it was of her first five years at Fairholme Court that she was thinking.

She remembered driving up to the house that was now her home.

She remembered walking through the hall into the drawing-room, distressfully conscious, even through her shyness, of the desecrated stateliness of a dwelling meant for beauty.

True, she would not in those days have known with what to replace the gaudy Axminster carpet in the hall, nor the arsenic green curtains at the drawing-room windows. But little as she had seen, little as she then knew of material loveliness, the right instinct she possessed for form and colour was

outraged at every turn by the indications at once trivial and ponderous of Mid-Victorian taste.

As she entered the drawing-room, Mrs. Burbage rose from the sofa on which she had been lying, a woollen rug of rainbow hues thrown across her feet.

She was a little old woman with grey, corkscrew curls hanging in bunches over her ears, keen eyes, and a mouth which combined shrewdness and suspicion.

She looked Anne up and down with a penetrating glance.

"I didn't think you would have grown so tall," she remarked. "You were a little creature when I last saw you. Ring for tea, my dear, and then I dare say you would like to go to your room. Parker will show you. Make yourself at home, and amuse yourself in your own way, if you can find anything to do in this dull place. I don't want you to think you need trouble about running after me, unless I ask for you. I hate fuss. There will be time enough for that when I get worse."

The words struck the keynote of the future relationship between the two women.

Even at that time Anne's benefactress was a semi-invalid who did not rise till noon, and usually spent the rest of the day on the sofa,

knitting interminably. Her illness, not at first severe, made any but the slightest attention unnecessary. She was a woman a little eccentric, often difficult in temper, but never exacting in trifles.

Her great abhorrence was what she called "fuss" of any sort, and as she frequently preferred to be alone, she left Anne for the most part free.

Her duties gradually became those of general supervision of the household, which composed as it was of elderly well-trained servants, proved no arduous task.

Few callers came to the house. There was never anything in the nature of entertainment at Fairholme Court. The days went on. Monotonously, peacefully, spring glided into summer, summer to autumn; the winters came and went.

A good understanding, a quiet comradeship was gradually established between the old woman and her companion, who moved so gently, whose voice was so soothing, who was always at hand when she happened to be wanted—never in the way when her presence was not required.

Anne practically led her own isolated life. Too shy to make any advances, the people of her own grade in the village, from the outset,

ignored the companion of a woman who had never been popular. She was just a quiet, harmless creature, lady-like certainly, but very dull, whom they occasionally pitied for being shut up with "that disagreeable Mrs. Burbage."

Anne found the bedroom she had loved as a child, now her own, almost unchanged. The rosebuds on the wall were faded certainly, but the dimity valance at the window, the white curtains to the bed were fresh and spotless, and the "spindly" furniture remained. The white roses had grown much taller. They clambered round the window now, and far above her head, looked down at her as she opened it in the morning.

The library was also unaltered, and in this room, and in the garden, Anne found all the joy of her life.

She was permitted to do what she liked with the garden, and, under the direction of the old gardener, who rejoiced to find some one who loved the work, and, delighted in its results, Anne planned and planted and laid the foundation for the beauty that now surrounded her. The hours in the open air restored her health. Insensibly, she grew strong and straight. Her always graceful figure developed, and though it was marred

by the ill-cut gowns of the village dressmaker, she carried it superbly.

Through the long winter days, the library was her solace and delight. At first, imperfectly educated as she was, unused to reading, owing to lack of time and lack of opportunity, she was bewildered by the numberless books through which she was free to range.

But gradually she found her way; made a path for herself, and followed it to find it leading her to distant prospects. Mr. Burbage, a gentle and scholarly recluse with a catholic taste in literature, had left a fine and widely representative library behind him, containing not only the masterpieces of French as well as English prose and poetry, but many curious and rare volumes dealing with the less frequented roads of mental travel.

Anne found history, biography, philosophy, in sufficient quantities to last her for a lifetime.

She found curious memoirs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as books on magic, on alchemy, on all the strange and recondite studies which at various periods have exercised human thought. French literature was well represented, and impelled by interest and curiosity, Anne began to recall

the little of the language she had learnt with her governess as a child. In this endeavour she unexpectedly found a ready teacher in Mrs. Burbage, who, educated in a French convent up to the time of her marriage, spoke the language fluently, and liked to speak it. Naturally gifted as a linguist, Anne learnt quickly, and often from choice, as time went on, the two women spoke French together, rather than English.

But it was to the English poets that Anne most often returned. Poetry suited her nature. It was the form of art which to her, most fully expressed the heights and depths, the beauty and the terror, the haunting melancholy, the fear, the inexpressible longings, the regrets, the sadness, the innocent delights of life, which, in all its complexity, she had begun to recognize through the world of books.

In life, men went down to the sea in ships, and did business in great waters. In life, there had been beautiful cities, in which a many-coloured crowd of citizens and soldiers, of artists and thinkers, had jostled and fought, and painted their thoughts in churches, and on palace walls; built them into soaring towers, and mighty cathedrals; woven them into immortal books, and lived them in schemes for the regeneration of the world. In life, as

Anne had come to know it through her reading, there had been, and still were, fierce passions of love and hate, swaying men and women as the trees of a forest are swayed by a rushing wind. Passions which had given birth to the great stories of the world—the stories of Helen of Troy, of Abelard and Heloise, of Launcelot and Guinevere, of Romeo and Juliet. In life, running like a dark mysterious stream, among the simpler sensations, the more elemental passions of humanity, there had been strange terrors, haunting curiosities, insatiable longings for the unattainable, the unknowable, the unrealized—the desire of the moth for the star.

In life too, there had always existed the fresh unspoiled delight in Nature's loveliness; in the charming natural embroidery of earth's garment. Delight in the simple things out of which, as her favourite Herrick told her, he rejoiced to make his songs.

*"I sing of Books, of Blossoms, Birds, and Bowers :
Of April, May, of June, and July flowers——"*

In poetry, as in a mirror, Anne found the result of all her reading reflected and transfigured.

It summed up for her all that she had learnt from other books, of love and life, and hope of immortality.

She began with Chaucer, and found him sweet and fresh and hardy as the hawthorn blossom with which he powders his English meadows. She found in him all the simple and tender emotions which have existed in the heart of man since he became human. The love of Custance for her child delighted her.

“Pees litel sone, I wol do thee no harm :
With that hire couverchief of hire hed she braid,
And over his litel eyen she it laid.

• • • • •
O litel child, alas ! what is thy gilt
That never wroughtest sinne as yet parde ?”

The gentle, natural words, written five hundred years ago, went to her heart. She loved the gaiety, the bustle, the gossip, the sense of colour and vitality in that long procession which wound from the Tabard Inn, along the white roads full of sunshine, which led to Canterbury.

She read the ballads which like vivid lightning flashes illumine the darkness of the Middle Ages, and show the mainsprings of human action to be ever the old mainsprings of love and hate.

She came to the Elizabethan poets—to the period when England had become “a nest of singing birds.” She found Spenser’s glorious love-song, and the wonderful cry in

which Marlowe's Faust links one great love-story to another.

“Was this the face that launched a thousand ships
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss——”

She learnt to know so well that they haunted her thoughts like music, the sonnets of Shakespeare, and the lyrics of all the “singing birds,” Lodge and Peele and Nash, Ben Jonson and Campion, who, a musician in every sense of the word, framed his “Ayres for one voyce with the Lute or Violl,” so as “to couple words and notes lovingly together.” She came to Milton, and the lighter poets of the Restoration, of whom her love was given chiefly to Herrick. The poets of comparatively modern times followed, and led her in due time to Keats and Shelley, who revealed to her the modern note of unrest, and the troubling effect on the human spirit, of beauty, whether revealed as to Keats in the material world, or as to Shelley in the intangible world of ideas. With these two poets, the library, formed in her old friend's youth, paused abruptly in its representations of English poetry.

Anne found no volume of Browning, nor of Tennyson, on the shelves.

In her friend's day they were young,

untried men, as in a still greater degree, were Swinburne, Morris, and Meredith.

But without them, Anne, like Keats, had travelled in the realms of gold, and the new planet that swam into her ken was the very world in which for thirty years she had lived blind and a prisoner, ignorant of its beauty, deaf to its calling voices.

It was of her five years of solitary reading that Anne was thinking as she sat in the September sunshine with François's letter open on her lap.

She had read, she had thought. Imaginatively, she had entered into the life of the great world outside her country home.

But of actual individual experience of one personal heart-beat, known to thousands of men and women past and present, she was as ignorant at thirty-five as she had been all through her quiet existence.

Like the Lady of Shalott, she sat weaving her tapestry of dreams before a magic mirror in which the pageant of the world was nothing but a reflection; a shadow-dance of figures, loving, hating, struggling; pursuing brave adventures, triumphing or defeated, hopeful or despairing.

Miss Page folded her letter, and replaced it slowly in its envelope.

It was the day for her class of village children, whom she taught to sew, and to whom, while they wrestled with long seams, she read fairy tales.

There was tea in the garden afterwards, and she had forgotten to tell Burks to put out the strawberry jam.

She rose, and went into the house to repair the omission.

VII

"WE shall have a very dull winter," complained Mrs. Carfax, "with so many of you away. Sylvia and Mrs. Dakin have gone already, and now you are going to desert us. We shall feel quite lost."

It was a damp afternoon in mid-October, and the wood-fire in Miss Page's drawing-room glowed cheerfully.

The tea-table was drawn up near its blaze, and Mrs. Carfax leant back comfortably in the corner of the sofa, sipping her tea and eating hot cakes appreciatively.

"So you're going to Rome?" she continued. "We hoped as you didn't go away last year you had become reconciled to an English winter."

"I didn't mean to go," confessed Anne. "I was very happy here last year. But somehow this autumn I have begun to long for more sunshine. I know we've had a lovely summer, and I ought to be content, but the rain of the last fortnight has decided me."

She glanced with a little shiver towards the drenched garden. The rain had been too persistent to make much sweeping of leaves practicable, and the grass was strewn with them, yellow, battered and rotting.

"Tell me about Sylvia!" she inquired. "I heard from her the other day, but I dare say you have later news. She seems very happy."

"Oh, she writes in excellent spirits, as of course she would, now she's got her own way."

Mrs. Carfax's expression was one of rather irritable displeasure, and Anne's inward reflections turned on that deplorable yet possibly comprehensible antagonism which so frequently exists between children and parents; the tie of blood so binding, yet so provocative of mutual adverse criticism, involuntary irritation and impatience.

"Do you like the boarding-house?" she asked.

"Oh yes. Very nice. Her father and I took her there last week, you know. I couldn't be easy till I'd seen what sort of place she was in. And men are no good at that sort of thing." She helped herself to another tea-cake.

"Oh yes," she repeated, "it's a very comfortable house; on the Embankment, I think

you call it. At any rate, it's quite close to the school where she takes her lessons. Sylvia shares a sitting-room with Susie Villiers, one of her school-fellows who is studying at the Slade, is it? I always forget the names of these places. It's a house built on purpose for students, I understand. *Most* comfortable. Hot and cold water on every floor, and bath-rooms, and a beautiful dining-room. To my mind it's all *too* luxurious. Everything is done nowadays, it seems to me, to tempt young people from their homes."

Mrs. Carfax gave an exasperated sigh.

"But Sylvia has a great gift, dear Mrs. Carfax," pleaded Anne. "It isn't as though she leaves home to do nothing."

"That's what her father says now. He never used to. He always upheld me in maintaining that the place of the eldest daughter is at home. I don't know what you could have said to change him so, Miss Page, but ever since he talked to you about Sylvia, his cry is that it's sinful not to use the gifts with which God has endowed us. Men are so inconsistent; and if they're clergymen they always seem able to quote some text to annoy you. I don't mean to be profane, but sometimes I have found the Bible most trying."

Mrs. Carfax sighed again.

"She has a lovely voice. You will be proud of her one day," declared Miss Page, with her disarming smile.

"But what is she going to do with it? I would never consent to a child of mine singing in public, with her name in newspapers, and on placards and all that! It would break my heart."

"Still you needn't think of the future yet, need you? She has years of training before her."

"But if she's not going to do anything with it, what a waste of money!" exclaimed Mrs. Carfax, tragically. "I think it's much better for girls not to have gifts," she added.

Miss Page was rather disposed to consider that her guest had uttered a great truth.

Her reply however, was non-committal.

"Perhaps," she said. "But if they *do* possess them don't you agree with Mr. Carfax that it's right to cultivate them? A gift of any sort is such a worrying thing," she added persuasively. "And if it's allowed to rust, it chiefly worries its possessor. Now that she's doing what she was born to do, Sylvia will be contented. I *don't* think it's just because she's getting her own way that she's happy. It's deeper than that. She's satisfied because she's fulfilling a need of her nature for which

she's no more responsible than she is for the colour of her very pretty eyes."

Anne's voice was so gentle, her smile so irresistible, that Mrs. Carfax was visibly softened.

"At any rate I'm glad it's not art she's got a taste for," she conceded.

To Mrs. Carfax, painting, to the exclusion of all the other activities of the Muses, was art, as Miss Page understood.

"You wouldn't like her to paint?"

"Oh landscapes and flowers, and that sort of thing is all right. A very nice amusement. I've got lots of water-colour sketches I did as a girl, and hand-painted screens, and sofa cushions too. But nowadays art is such a shocking thing, isn't it? I hear that Susie Villiers draws from the nude, as they call it. To me, it's a perfectly disgusting idea. And they draw *men*, as well as women. Imagine a young girl having the boldness to draw a man without his clothes!"

"Do have some of this toast before it gets cold," urged Anne. "Oh! while I think of it I wish you would tell me how to make that delicious shortbread I tasted the last time I came to you."

Mrs. Carfax, adroitly switched off the topic of art as she understood it, was on firm ground

now that culinary operations held the conversational field.

She gave minute directions to which her friend listened with flattering attention.

"I must write that down before I forget it," said Anne, opening a bureau to take from it her book of recipes.

"How beautifully orderly you are!" exclaimed her guest, glancing with admiration at the packets of papers tied with ribbon, the piles of little books which filled the pigeon-holes. "What a pity you never married. You would have made *such* a good wife. The wives of to-day are shocking housekeepers. Look at that flighty little Mrs. Dakin! The doctor, poor man, must suffer a good deal. I doubt whether he ever gets a decent meal. Don't you think it's very extraordinary of him to let her go away for such a long visit as she proposes to make? I think that kind of thing is a mistake, you know."

Launched upon the stream of gossip for which she possessed a considerable weakness, Mrs. Carfax shook her head portentously.

"He thinks it will be good for her health. She's not very strong, is she? And this place doesn't suit her in the winter."

"Oh! I don't think there's much the matter with her health," answered Mrs. Carfax with

a touch of scorn. "She hasn't anything else to think of. She hasn't enough to do, that's what's the matter with her. One or two children would soon make her forget her ailments. Poor Dr. Dakin! I *don't* think she's very nice to him, do you? I often pity him."

"But I'm quite sure they're devoted to one another," began Miss Page, hailing with relief the entrance of the Vicar, who had called to fetch his wife, and to bid their hostess farewell.

"Well, dear lady!" he exclaimed in his hearty voice. "So you're off to the land of perpetual sunshine to-morrow. Lucky woman! And Rome too, a city which I have always had a great desire to visit. Most interesting. Most interesting. But you leave us desolate."

"How kind of you to come and say good-bye! My farewells this week have made me quite sad," declared Anne. "I hate last days."

"We shall all miss you terribly. You leave a heart-broken community behind you," said the Vicar. "Poor Dakin is already bemoaning his fate, bereft of his wife and of you. It's a good thing Sylvia isn't here, or we should have had nothing but lamentations till the spring."

"You all spoil me," Anne said in a moved voice. "We have been talking about Sylvia,"

she went on rather hurriedly. "I'm so glad she's happy."

"Best thing for her. Quite the right thing!" declared the Vicar emphatically. "I'm always telling my wife that gifts are ours as a sacred trust. Moreover, when the girl comes back for the holidays and so on, she will appreciate her home, and we shall all get on much better in consequence. Girls as well as boys must find their own paths, and make their own lives. To thwart them only leads to unnecessary friction, and is after all unjust. Every girl should have her chance."

If Miss Page smiled in secret to find the ideas she had implanted in the Vicar's mind so well assimilated that they re-appeared in the form of original conviction, no trace of her amusement was visible.

"I'm sure Mrs. Carfax will find that you're right," was her remark, as she smiled at the lady in question.

Mrs. Carfax kissed her affectionately. "Good-bye. I'm sure we're preventing you from looking after your packing," she said.

"Good-bye," echoed her husband, enclosing Anne's frail hand in his vigorous clasp. "Don't let Sylvia bother you with too many letters. I am convinced that I've done the right thing by the child in sticking to my own ideas."

He smiled the manly smile of self-confidence and wisdom denied to women, and Miss Page, following her visitors to the hall-door, waved to them as they went down the drive together.

The amusement that she need no longer repress, was in her eyes, as she went upstairs to her room; the gentle tolerant amusement of a woman old enough to look at life with kindly sympathy for its absurdities, and that charity without which the spectacle has a tendency to move to a mirth as bitter and more cruel than anger.

She found Burks on her knees before a trunk, still engaged in packing.

"That will do, Burks. I'll finish it myself," she said. "You go down and get your tea."

After the maid had left, Anne opened the door which led from her bedroom into her sitting-room, and examined the shelves with the idea of choosing one or two favourite books to take with her on her journey.

The books in this room were chiefly modern, supplementing the library downstairs.

She chose one or two French novels, and a little volume of Herrick, which had found its way to the shelves mostly devoted to French literature. Then she returned to the bedroom,

which was already bright with lamp and fire-light.

She hesitated a moment, then went to the bureau, from which several months before she had taken her old journal.

This time she sought for, and found another book. After adjusting the spring, and locking the writing part of the piece of furniture, she thrust this volume, without looking at it, deep into her nearly filled trunk.

VIII

ANNE always returned with pleasure to Rome, a city which she knew well, and to which she was bound by many memories. She settled down happily with her maid in the little hotel in the heart of the city, at which she frequently stayed.

It had been chosen chiefly on account of the garden which her rooms overlooked—one of those charming Roman gardens, full of orange-trees in tubs, of oleanders, and of clambering vines.

A fountain splashed in the midst, and the sound of its falling water was music in her ears.

The deep blue sky, the dazzling sunshine never ceased to fill her with a sense of buoyancy and youth, and all her wanderings to distant churches, to ruined temples; amongst pictures, and statues, were a delight.

One morning, when she had tired herself by a long ramble through the halls and corridors of the Vatican, she returned with the

determination to do nothing for the rest of the day, but read and be lazy.

She went to her room after lunch, her mind filled with the beauty of the Borgia rooms in which she had just lingered.

The ribbed ceilings, rich with the gorgeous colour of the emblems and coats-of-arms of the princely house, the marble pavements, the lofty windows, formed the empty frame into which her fancy painted pictures of the scenes those rooms had beheld. She heard the rustle of dresses stiff with gold and gems ; she caught the backward glance of many a face ; the face of Isabella d'Este, of Beatrice, of Lucrezia, framed in the golden hair she washed so frequently, and tended with such care.

*“ What’s become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms ? ”*

Browning’s words had come to Anne’s mind as she stood for a moment alone in one of the ante-chambers, and glanced about her as though expecting it to be full of ghosts.

She wondered how many of these golden-haired women had loved the painted walls upon which her eyes now rested. Those wonderful frescoes of Pinturicchio with their background of valley and mountain, and their flower-starred meadows ; their animals and

birds, their fantastic towers, their dainty figures, fanciful and charming as a fairy tale.

She hoped they had loved them, and praised the painter with their sweetest smiles.

Outside in the garden, the fountain splashed in the sunshine, and suddenly its melody was the melody of her own fountain in her own English garden at home.

She thought of it lovingly, and planned a new hedge of briar-roses in the sunny corner where the dovecote stood.

Gradually the memory of the garden filled her mind, and blotted out the stately visions of palaces and princes.

It grew peopled with well-known figures, with men who twenty years ago had walked with her across its green lawn, had sat with her under its trees, laughing, talking, reading, sometimes, but rarely silent.

Presently she rose, and took from a locked drawer the book she had brought from home, and till this moment, forgotten.

Sitting in the sunshine, with the splash of the fountain sounding in her ears, Anne opened it.

"*March 3.* Hugh came home last November to marry Alice," were the first words that met her eyes.

"They have taken a little furnished cottage

by the sea, at St. Margaret's Bay near Dover, and they want me to stay with them before they sail for New Zealand. Mrs. Burbage says of course I must go, and I start to-morrow to be with them for a fortnight. I long to see Hugh again, but I'm shy at the thought of meeting his wife. I have never seen her."

Except for the mention of her return to Fairholme Court, there was nothing written in the book from that date, till May of the same year, and the painful colour crept into Anne's face as she noticed this.

There was no need for written record. Clearly, as though she had recently lived through the experience, she remembered that fortnight's visit.

She remembered getting out of the train at the wayside station, the nearest station touched by the railroad, for St. Margaret's Bay. Her heart was beating rather fast. It was eighteen years since she had seen Hugh. Should she recognize him? He would not know her. When he last came home she was a girl of seventeen. The thought of her present age struck her with a shock of dismay.

There were only two people on the platform. A big burly man, tall and bearded, and beside him a girl in a white serge dress.

Hugh and his wife!

"I am Anne," she stammered, going up to them.

Hugh put his arms round her with his old impulsive roughness, and then held her away from him.

"Why, you've grown, Anne!" he cried gaily. "You were such a little thing! So slight, I mean. Darling, this is Anne. Isn't she a demned fine woman?"

His old laugh rang out boyishly, as Anne turned shyly to his wife.

She was very small, very daintily made, very prettily dressed. Her face, despite her twenty-five years, was still babyish with its large blue eyes and rings of soft hair round a childish forehead. She took her sister-in-law's hand and smiled, but even then, Anne did not miss the quick glance that scrutinized her quizzically from head to foot.

From that moment, she knew that for Alice she was merely a dowdily dressed woman; an old maid, some one to be treated with patronizing kindness.

They drove from the station to the cottage, which was almost upon the sea-shore.

"Hugh loves the sea. He can't be happy away from it, can you, darling?" Alice asked,

slipping her hand into his, as they entered the little parlour where tea was spread.

"Now Anne, tell us all about it!" exclaimed Hugh as they sat down. "Bless my soul, it's seventeen or eighteen years since I saw you. What have you been doing all this time?"

A sudden paralyzing blankness fell upon Anne's mind.

What had she been doing? For thirteen years after her brother's last departure, she had lived in the little house in Tufton Street, managing the house work, anxiously counting her weekly allowance for fear that with all her pains, both ends could not be made to meet. She had nursed a hopeless invalid, and tried to bear his exacting temper with patience. For the last five of the eighteen years she had read books, and worked in the garden. There was nothing to tell them.

Instinctively she felt that to these people who belonged to practical life, who lived and loved, who were in the mainstream of human activity, her world of books meant nothing.

The colour rushed to her cheeks, and left them white.

"I—I have done nothing at all," she stammered. "You know I have been living with Mrs. Burbage for five years? She's

very kind. But she's almost an invalid, so we're—we're very quiet. Tell me about yourself, Hugh. Things are always happening to you."

"Well, *this* has happened to me," he returned with a laugh, slipping his arm round his wife's shoulder. "The best thing that ever happened in my life."

Alice drew close to him with a little nestling movement, and Anne suddenly felt a sickening pain at her heart.

"Don't be so silly, Hugh! Any one would think we were lovers," she declared, turning to her sister-in-law. "And we've been married ages. Nearly four months."

"Well, aren't we lovers?" demanded Hugh, shaking her. "Answer me at once. Aren't we?"

She got up laughing, and kissed the top of his head.

"Of course we are. But don't be silly!" she commanded. She blushed, but her eyes were bright with happiness.

"Oh never mind Anne!" said Hugh. "She's one of the family. She doesn't count."

The light, kindly meant words caused Anne another strange pang. She didn't count. Of course she didn't count. Why should she?

"How lovely the sea is!" she exclaimed hastily. "I can't look at it enough. You know I've only seen it once before."

"Nonsense! How's that?" asked Hugh, with the easy forgetfulness of a man who does not realize the straitened life in which he never had a part.

"I never went away," said Anne, simply. "There was no money. Once when I was a child, Miss Atkins took me for a day to Broadstairs. You remember Miss Atkins?"

"Old Thomas? She was Anne's governess, and exactly like a tortoise-shell cat," he explained turning to his wife. "Yes, what's become of her?"

"Dead," said Anne. "She died ten years ago."

"Poor old thing!" returned Hugh perfunctorily. "Darling, won't you show Anne her room, and then we can go for a walk before supper. Isn't it warm here!" he exclaimed, leaning from the open window. "It's so sheltered you see with the cliffs at the back. Make haste, Anne. We'll take you on to the downs, and show you the sea to your heart's content."

At supper the talk was all about Hugh. His past adventures, his future prospects. He had worked hard, and was now partner of the

promising sheep farm in New Zealand, to which next month he proposed to return with his wife.

"I tell Alice it won't be a very gay existence for her. She doesn't look much like a farmer's wife, does she?" He threw her an admiring glance. "But she declares she won't mind."

"*You'll* be there," was Alice's only comment.

"Oh yes! And there are neighbours too. Very jolly people. And Bob Holmes, that's my partner, you know, Anne, is an awfully decent fellow. You'll like his wife, Alice. She's such a cheery little woman. Oh! it's not so bad. And the climate's splendid. Lord! how one misses the sun in this damp misty old country!"

"It will be lovely. I'm longing to go," Alice exclaimed.

"You see she's only got an uncle and aunt to leave," explained Hugh, turning to his sister. "She's a very lonely little person."

"Not now," said Alice, her voice full of content.

Before she had been with them two days, Anne had found herself filled with a passionate longing to return to her quiet home. To get

back to the shelter in which she was not reminded twenty times an hour that she "didn't count."

She was amazed at the violence of her own emotions.

Every glance exchanged by the married lovers, every word of love, every caress, stabbed her afresh.

She had never before known what it was to feel acutely, and the suffering bewildered her. She was afraid of it. She wanted desperately to escape from herself, this new self which seemed all torn and bleeding.

There was a hunted look in her eyes like that of a starving and desperate animal. She shuddered at them sometimes when they met her suddenly in the glass. One evening, unable to bear the sight of their endearments, she had gone early to her room, pleading a headache. She groped her way to the window, in the dark, and kneeling down beside it, looked out upon the sea.

Every few minutes, a flash from the lighthouse on the cliffs momentarily illumined the still water. Far out, lights moved on the prow of passing ships. She could hear the wash and murmur of the waves, as they broke lazily on the pebbly shore.

For a long time she knelt there immovable,

the sound of the sea lulling her into a sort of painless trance, till the hum of voices below gradually filtered to her senses. The evening was so warm that Hugh and his wife were sitting in the garden. At first, numbed and half conscious in mind, she scarcely heeded the murmur of talk, but finally a sentence in a man's voice reached her consciousness.

"Nonsense, darling! She's not at all bad looking. Well dressed, she'd be a fine figure of a woman."

"Why is she so dowdy then?"

"She lives in the country, you see. I suppose there's no one to dress for. And after all what does it matter?"

There was a little laugh. "No. She's too old now. She'll never marry."

Again there was an incoherent murmur. "Yes I know, darling, it's boring for you. But she's had a dreary life, poor girl. I want you to be nice to her."

"I *am* nice," the answer came in a hurt voice, and was followed immediately by a rustle.

"I know you are. You're a darling. You're the sweetest thing on this earth!"

There was a sound of a kiss, and Anne drew back from the window with a quick movement.

"Hush!" The exclamation came swiftly from Hugh.

"Oh! it's all right. Her light's out. She's asleep."

Anne closed the window noiselessly to shut out the voices to which she had listened without her will, scarcely conscious of how they had reached her. She threw herself on her bed in the dark. After all, as Hugh said, it didn't matter. But she cried all night as though it did.

In the journal which Miss Page held open on her knee, she saw the date of her return recorded.

"Came back to Fairholme Court, March 17th."

She remembered her old friend's greeting, as she went to find her in the morning-room, where she was lying on the sofa.

"Why, Anne! Sea air doesn't suit you. You've got thin, my dear. You look quite ill. You mustn't go away again."

"No," she said quietly. "I will never go away again."

She remembered going into the library before she took off her walking things, looking round at the walls lined with books, and wondering why they had ever meant anything to her at all.

"Books are no good," she said to herself, as she went upstairs.

"This also is vanity," was what the words implied.

Miss Page looked out with a sort of surprise upon the garden steeped in sunshine. The fountain was still splashing gaily into its marble basin. In the blue overhead, two pigeons flashed and wheeled. She had been living over again the life of many years ago, with such intensity of vision and of feeling, that her present surroundings had the unreality of a dream.

After a few moments, she turned the next page, knowing well what she should find, yet curious to see the words in her own handwriting of twenty years ago.

"May 15th.—We have had visitors to-day for the first time almost, since I have lived here. They were all men, too, and Frenchmen. The parents of one of them, Monsieur René Dampierre, knew Mrs. Burbage long ago, and he called and brought three friends with him."

As Anne slowly turned the pages, isolated paragraphs met her eye.

"I felt horribly shy at first, but only for a little while. They were all so nice. I suppose

Frenchmen have easier manners than Englishmen, though I have had no experience of either."

"Monsieur Fontenelle is very amusing and clever. I like his face, though he looks sarcastic, and I'm sure he can say bitter things. But he never says them to me."

"Mrs. Burbage wanted me to describe Monsieur Dampierre in whom she is chiefly interested, because she knew him when he was a child. I found it very difficult. When I had said that he was tall, and broad-shouldered, and very fair and handsome, it seemed as though I had said nothing. It's his smile and his changing face which make up his personality—a very charming one."

All through that summer there were short entries concerning the little colony of Frenchmen that had settled in the village.

Anne glanced at them with a smile. It was a very sweet smile, scarcely sad, scarcely regretful. It was the smile of content with which a woman bends over a bowl of dried rose-leaves, and feels again the warmth of the sun, and sees the glitter and the blueness of the day when the leaves were red.

IX

It was grey and cheerless in Paris, while Anne sat in the sunshine of Rome.

Winter had set in early, and in François's studio the stove piled with fuel was almost insufficient to warm the great room.

It was as he had suggested, the typical luxurious studio of a rich man.

A broad divan under the window, was piled with cushions, and supported by them in an attitude suggestive of extreme comfort, François sat and smoked while he talked to an old friend.

The Vicomte de Montmédy, rich now, through his marriage with an American heiress, was a lover of the arts, a connoisseur and a buyer of pictures.

Fontenelle had known him in the days when he was only a struggling and unsuccessful painter.

His title and his noble birth, had stood him in better stead than his talent. That this was of an inferior quality to his fine taste in

art, François had early recognized, and his felicitations on the subject of his prudent marriage had therefore gained an added warmth and fervour of approval.

The two men had been talking while the daylight waned, and when François, finding his match-box empty, rose to refill it from a jar on a side table, he paused to glance with a shiver upon the prospect outside the window.

The studio looked upon the Luxembourg Gardens. The trees were bare now, and their branches showed black and stiff against a wintry sky.

The paths underneath them, in summer gay as the flower beds, with children and their nurses, were now lightly powdered with the first fall of snow.

"I ought to have gone abroad," he declared, lighting a cigarette. "If it were not for these confounded commissions, I should be in Rome at this moment. There's no light here. It's abominable!"

"Why Rome?" asked the Vicomte lazily.

"I love Rome. And then sweet Anne Page is there, and she's always an attraction."

The other man looked up quickly. "By the way, it's *her* portrait the Luxembourg has bought, isn't it?"

"Yes." He made a quick movement. "Good heavens man, it's here, and I've never shown it to you. I forgot you hadn't seen it. It goes next week. I kept it to do a little work on the background first."

"Quick! Show me before the light goes," urged his friend. "I was always curious about it."

François crossed the studio rapidly, and returned with a large canvas.

"The best thing I ever did in my life," he said deliberately, as he placed it on an easel in the middle of the room.

The Vicomte had risen, and in a silence that lasted for some time the men stood before the picture.

"Charming!" he murmured at last. "Adorable! They've picked out the right thing, *mon ami*, *hein*? The smile! How well one remembers it. So sweet, and so shy. And that flowered gown. Admirable! It suggests one of the Botticelli Madonnas. It might be a robe all sown with stars. And the hair, that delicious soft hair that was no particular colour—*couleur de miel*, perhaps."

"Mistress Anne Page? She has brown hair, and speaks small, like a woman," quoted François softly.

"What's that?"

"It's Shakespeare. And it's Anne Page," he answered smiling.

"And the flowers!" The great sheaf of flowers she's carrying. They're English, and 'sweet-Anne' too."

Fontenelle looked amused. "You always pronounced it like that, — as one word!" he said.

"I used to think it *was* one word. Just a Christian name; a lovely name."

He joined in his friend's laugh.

"When did you do this?" he asked after a moment.

"Just before she went."

"Was I away then?"

"You were just married. You had gone to America with your wife."

"Yes. I stayed a year. But when I came back why didn't you show it to me?"

"I put it away. She wouldn't accept it, and I didn't want to see it, after she had gone. I never looked at it again till last spring. Paul! Do you know that picture's been painted eighteen years, and I've never done anything to touch it since? Encouraging, isn't it? Something to congratulate one's self upon."

The last words were accompanied by a bitter laugh. His friend was silent.

"Here comes tea," said François, with an abrupt change of voice.

His *femme de ménage* entered with a tray which she placed on one of the tables. She went out, and re-entered with the spirit lamp and kettle.

"*Voilà, Monsieur !*"

François began to put the tea into the teapot.

"Antoinette brews it abominably ; I always make it myself," he remarked.

"This tea-habit dates from 'Sweet Anne's' time, doesn't it ?" asked the Vicomte.

"I believe it does. Do you remember the flat in the Rue Vaugirard ? And Anne pouring out tea on winter afternoons ?"

Before the other man could answer, he turned to the picture again.

"I painted that as a sort of memory of the first day I saw her, in an old English garden. Did I ever tell you how we four, the old four, you know, first met Anne Page ? *You* only knew her here in Paris, when she had learnt to dress, when she had learnt to talk, when she had grown used to us and our ways. We saw her in her garden, when she knew no one, when from year's end to year's end she spoke to no one but the invalid old woman with whom she lived."

"What were you four doing in her garden?" inquired the Vicomte, helping himself to sugar.

"Well, René was in England. He was often there, visiting his relations—his mother's people.

"You know he was educated in England? Went to school there, to Beaumont, and afterwards lived some time in London. René was an Englishman with at least half his nature. And he loved England because of his mother. Well, he wrote to me that year—to Thouret, Dacier and me, to suggest that we should join him for the summer. He told us he'd found a gorgeous village, where we could all paint and write, and go on with our beastly art as much as we liked. We thought it wouldn't be bad, so we said all right, and packed up our traps and went.

"Have some more tea? Well, another cigarette?

"Dymfield is in Warwickshire, *mon cher*," he went on, striking a match, "And Warwickshire is Shakespeare's county, and Anne Page is one of Shakespeare's women. So it was all as right as it could be.

"We put up at the inn. The Falcon it was called. Such a jolly old place! Sixteenth century. Yawning fireplaces, beams, oak staircases, walls a yard thick. You know the sort of thing.

"And the village! Thatched roofs all stained with moss. Oh, the colour of those roofs! Cottage gardens full of hollyhocks and roses. Such a church! If you've ever seen a really beautiful English village, you'll know what I'm talking about. Dymfield is one of them."

"And how did you get to know Anne?"

"Well, René's mother had been a friend of the rich woman of the place, an old lady who no more deserved to possess Fairholme Court than she deserved Anne as her companion."

"Cantankerous?"

"I don't know anything about her moral qualities. Her taste was execrable. Anyhow René made his mother responsible for taking us to see the place—a wonderful jumble of every style from the fifteenth century downward. But beautiful! *Mon dieu*, beautiful as a dream. And Fate was kind. The old lady was ill in bed, and sweet Anne—I told you she was her companion, didn't I?—was forced to do the honours."

François got up, and began to pace up and down the floor as he talked.

"We were all packed into the drawing-room to wait, the first time we called, and while René was making absurd remarks about the sofa cushions, and the bead mats, and the

whole chamber of horrors, I caught sight of Anne coming across the lawn.

"She wore that gown." He nodded towards the portrait. "An absurd thing really, but it suited her because it showed her figure."

"Her figure was superb," murmured the Vicomte.

"Yes."

Fontenelle paused a moment. "Even at the time," he said rather slowly, "I wondered how she would strike René. Because she wasn't really beautiful, you know. Certainly not in those days. Only remarkable looking, curious, and very sweet."

"But he was struck too?"

"I remember he looked up suddenly, and said, 'By Jove, who on earth is this? It's some garden goddess or other. Flora. Yes, that's it,—Flora. Good Lord, let's run out and burn incense or something!'

"She had a heap of flowers, branches of lilac and hawthorn and things, in one arm, supported against her hip, and with the other hand she held her dress away from her feet. She was moving quickly across the grass. You know how she walks?"

"Then she came into the drawing-room, and we saw her curious face."

"There it is!" said the Vicomte, with his eyes on the portrait. "You've got it exactly. Something between a Botticelli Madonna and a pagan goddess—Flora is admirable. But it's the sort of face that it takes a painter to admire."

"She had been considered hideous all her life, of course. She thought herself desperately plain. Even when we burnt incense,—and René at once began to send it up in clouds,—she thought we were laughing at her." François laughed gently himself.

"You remember Anne? You know how she would take praise. Adorably, like a little girl who is almost too shy to be pleased. It was absurd, of course. She was by no means young even then, remember. But somehow that only made it more piquante. Anne is one of the few women for whom age is an absurd convention. Quite meaningless, quite beside the point. The goddesses are immortal."

"But there was nothing of the goddess about her nature," objected his friend.

"Good heavens, no! Except physically. She's a mortal woman if ever there was one. She's just what she always was, sweet Anne Page."

Twilight was creeping into the studio. The polished floor with its costly rugs, the pictures on the walls, the outlines of cabinets

and tables, all were growing dim and indistinct. The last light from the window above the men's heads fell across the face of the portrait on the easel. It looked down upon them gently with the wavering uncertain smile in the eyes, and on the lips, red and soft as the petals of a rose.

"René saw a great deal of her that summer, I suppose?" asked the Vicomte, breaking a silence.

"We all did. The gods for their own inscrutable purposes had decided Anne's fate. The old lady got weaker and insisted upon having a hospital nurse. She was in her room all day in bed, and Anne was bidden to entertain us.

"When we were not in her garden, she was at the old barn which René and I had rigged up as a studio.

"She amazed us all. Do you know those tightly shut buds on a rose-tree, that you think will never open? And then the sun shines, and gradually, very slowly, a little every day, they grow pinker and sweeter, till at last they are roses?

"I think the sun came out for Anne that year, for the first time in her life.

"We made her laugh. I don't believe she had ever laughed before. And we discovered

that she had brains, and taste and understanding, and *instinct* for everything that fired our young brains. Instinct is the word for Anne. It's a sixth sense with her. The only sense it's any good for a woman to possess. The very sense that nowadays with their education and their emancipation, and their 'rights,' women are doing their best to kill.

"And she'd read, *mon cher*. Good heavens, what she'd read! The modern English woman with her smattering of Latin and Greek, is an ill-educated prig beside her. For five years she had been shut up in a library, and I believe she had read everything worth reading in her own literature, and much of ours too, for that matter. And I, who like René am partly English by education at least, know what that means. It's a magnificent literature for those who have ears to hear, and a heart to understand."

He began to light one of the lamps, stooping over it as he talked.

"She used to read poetry to us sometimes. Thouret and Dacier knew very little English then, but they could understand the simple things when she read them. I can hear Thouret now, trying to say after her—

"*'I sing of times trans-shifting; and I write
How Roses first came red, and Lilies white.'*"

François laughed, as he mimicked the accent of his friend the novelist, who since the days of which he talked, had attained an almost European reputation.

"That's Herrick. You don't know him? Well, he's an English seventeenth-century poet, and he wrote on purpose for a woman as simple and natural as Anne Page. She used to read him to us in an old walled garden, where in June that year, the lilies were 'coming white.'"

"And Dampierre?" asked the Vicomte. "I didn't know Dampierre in those days, remember. Tell me something about him."

He spoke as one speaks of a great man who is dead, whose lightest word is of importance to the admirers who survive him.

"René was twenty-seven then," said François, slowly. "He was a year younger than I. You know how he looked? He was like his mother. Quite magnificent. Oh sometimes absurdly handsome, when the right mood affected his face. He used to dress like an Englishman in those days, in white flannels. When he and Anne walked together they were worth looking at, I can tell you."

"But she was, what was it? Seven—ten years older?"

"Yes. She remembered that," returned François.

His companion glanced quickly in his direction. He had never heard the whole story, and his curiosity was roused; but something in his friend's voice assured him that it would not be gratified.

He made a tentative effort, however, by a suggestion half seriously offered.

"*Mon ami*, you were in love with her yourself."

François echoed his light laugh. "No," he declared. "No. My feeling for her now is what it has always been. I have paid her the compliment of thinking of her in a different way from every other woman I ever met. And I've never arrived at defining that way to myself. An English writer—I'm boring you to death with English writers to-day,—comes nearest to it in his definition of religion. He says '*religion is morality touched by emotion.*'"

"Well, I believe what I have always felt for Anne Page is affectionate morality," he laughed again, "strict morality mind, touched with emotion."

"Have you seen her lately?"

"I saw her last June, for the first time in three or four years."

"She's altered, of course?"

"She has. She's more beautiful. She's really beautiful now, so that even the turnip-headed people she lives among see and acknowledge it."

"That's rather wonderful."

"You would think so, if you saw her with them. She's the village goddess and oracle. Giving to charities with both hands, petitioned for advice and counsel, loved by every one, high and low. That's not surprising. Nor is it more surprising, I suppose, that she's happy. Her nature is essentially simple and maternal. She ought to have had children and children's children by now."

He got up and switched on all the lights, revealing the spacious room, and the beautiful things it contained; revealing also once more the portrait on the easel.

The Vicomte again examined it. "The Luxembourg has made a good choice," he repeated. "It's a beautiful thing, *mon cher*. Gracious, dignified, sweet—but sad. In spite of the smile, because of it, I suppose, profoundly sad. But why? She was not, she is not a sad woman."

François was moving about the room, rearranging the canvases against the wall.

"She was sad then."

The Vicomte waited, but François said no more, and the conversation turned upon other matters.

As he rose to go, he stooped to examine a little sketch propped up on the top of a cabinet, against the wall.

"That's rather nice," he remarked critically. "It's the little woman I met here the other day, isn't it? Dark. Pretty. English. Who is she?"

"A Mrs. Dakin. By the way, she's one of Anne Page's friends. One of the people in her village. She's staying here with Madame Didier."

"Louis Didier's wife? Did they know her then?" asked his friend quickly.

"Who? Anne? No. It was all ages before their time. Louis has only been in Paris five or six years."

"So much the better. That woman's a cat, *mon cher*. Sleek fur, claws and all."

"Madame Didier? I agree," returned François with a laugh. "The typical English devotee of Mrs. Grundy. Louis goes in mortal fear of her."

"*Tant pis!*" exclaimed the Vicomte, with an accent of commiseration.

X

TOWARDS the middle of December, Mrs. Carfax became possessed with the idea of going to London.

Various circumstances had combined to render her projected visit pleasantly fraught with interest.

There was shopping to be done, of course. There was also Sylvia to embrace;—Sylvia whose holidays were so short that she herself had suggested the advisability of staying in town for Christmas, in order not to interrupt her work.

Naturally Mrs. Carfax was anxious to see her child. Naturally also she looked forward to staying with the Lovells, who were old friends, and had a comfortable house in Bayswater.

Then too, she had been deeply interested to hear that the niece who was visiting Mrs. Lovell, was none other than the Madame Didier who had invited Mrs. Dakin to Paris.

Mrs. Dakin had not yet returned to

Dymfield, and it was natural and neighbourly of Mrs. Carfax to feel as much interest in her protracted absence, as that which palpitated in every Dymfield breast. In a few days she would be in the position of knowing all that Madame Didier knew about her late guest. And then there was Sylvia of course, and the shopping, and the delight of meeting her dear friends the Lovells. Mrs. Carfax was quite determined to go.

"I shall take the three o'clock train this afternoon," she announced to the Vicar at breakfast time, "and send a telegram to Laura. She is quite ready for me, and urges me to come at once."

"Very well, my dear," agreed the Vicar. "Please yourself of course, though I scarcely think it necessary. You were in town only three months ago."

"You don't think it necessary to see Sylvia, who is not coming home for Christmas?" demanded his wife. "Well, I do. I have the feelings of a mother after all, and I think it's cruel to leave the poor child up there, with never the sight of a home face."

"Please yourself, my dear, as I have already said. There seems to be a spirit of great unrest working amongst us," he went on, stirring his second cup of coffee irritably.

"There's Miss Page abroad, and Sylvia away, and Mrs. Dakin not yet returned. And now you——"

"Children, go upstairs if you've finished your breakfast," interrupted their mother. "Johnny, say grace. Now all of you go and get your lessons ready for Miss Hope. She'll be here in a minute."

There was a stampede to the door, and when it closed on the last child, Mrs. Carfax turned to her husband.

"It's most extraordinary about Mrs. Dakin, isn't it?" she exclaimed. "And such a strange thing that this Madame Didier should be Major Lovell's niece. I heard something once about a niece of his having married a Frenchman, but I never knew her name. I shall probably hear all about Mrs. Dakin from her."

"Then my dear Mary, if you do, I hope you will be discreet."

"Discreet, George? What do you mean? Am I not always discreet?"

The Vicar prudently disregarded the question.

"What I wish to point out, is this," he returned. "The duty of taking broad and charitable views. There is a reasonable explanation of Mrs. Dakin's absence. I met

Dakin yesterday, and he told me it was a question of his wife's health. She's seeing some doctor in Paris, and going through a course of treatment."

Mrs. Carfax sniffed. "With her own husband a doctor!"

"My dear, you know as well as I do that doctors seldom attend their wives."

"You annoy me, George. You speak as though I should be glad to hear that there was any other reason. I'm sure I hope with all my heart it's the true one. But everybody is talking about it, and I must say I think the poor man looks very unhappy."

"Broad views," returned the Vicar, clearing his throat, "are those which in Christian charity we should always endeavour to assume with regard to our fellows. Let us remember also, that we have neither part nor lot in this matter."

"Why don't you tell me straight out to mind my own business?" asked Mrs. Carfax angrily. "It's what you mean. And we're not in church, so you needn't beat about the bush. You only take 'broad views' as you call them, when you want to be annoying and put me in the wrong. You know as well as I do that it's not right for a wife to stay months away from her husband. Dr. Dakin must be a fool to allow it. At the same time,

you know how delighted I should be if it *is* all right. And yet you pretend to think that in a spirit of vulgar curiosity I'm going up to town on purpose to gossip and try to find out things which don't concern me ! My object in going, as you know, is to see Sylvia——”

“And to do some shopping. Yes, my dear. Yes. You've said so many times,” interrupted her husband, rising. “You'd better tell Mark to bring the trap round at half-past two.”

The Vicar closed the breakfast-room door with a slightly firm touch.

“Is mamma going to London to-day ?” shouted Johnny, who regardless of lesson books, was sliding down the banisters outside.

“I believe so. I trust it may do her good,” answered his father piously. “Go upstairs, at once, and get ready for Miss Hope.”

He entered his study, and with some disinclination, sat down to the sermon for which a more deferential hearing might possibly be anticipated than that accorded in the home circle.

Mrs. Carfax arrived at Rushworth Terrace just in time to dress for dinner. Madame Didier, to whom she was presented in the drawing-room just before the gong sounded, was a tall young woman of twenty-seven or

twenty-eight, with a sharp face and a thin pointed nose. Her fair hair was arranged neatly over her forehead, and her dress, though fashionable, was undistinguished.

"Helen doesn't look a bit French, does she?" asked her aunt.

Mrs. Lovell was a fat comfortable woman with no figure, and less intelligence.

"I'm glad she's kept so English. One would have thought that living in Paris so long would have made a Frenchwoman of her."

"We should quarrel if it had!" declared the Major in a loud voice. "I don't like foreigners. Can't stand 'em. Beg your pardon, my dear. I forgot your husband!"

He laughed heartily. "But you must excuse me. I've never seen him, and I dare say you've made an Englishman of him. Hope so, I'm sure."

"Oh, nothing would make an Englishman of Louis, I'm sorry to say," answered Madame Didier. "He can't bear England. We're always fighting about it."

"Well, come along! Dinner. Dinner. I'm famished," declared the Major.

"Come along, Mrs. Carfax. How's your husband? And the children? All well, eh? That's right."

"I'm so interested to hear that you know a

neighbour of ours," began Mrs. Carfax during the first favourable opportunity at dinner-time.

"Oh! Madge Dakin? Yes. Aunt Laura has been telling me that you are neighbours. She has been staying with us in Paris, as of course you know."

"Yes. I'm so sorry to hear she is ill."

Mrs. Carfax helped herself to bread sauce, and waited in suspense.

"Madge is never quite so ill as she thinks she is," replied Madame Didier in her decisive voice. "It's all a question of nerves with her. However, I suggested she should go to a doctor who did me a great deal of good some time ago. I'm a *real* sufferer from nerves. And as I couldn't keep her any longer—I had visits to pay and so on,—she is boarding with some people in Paris to go on with the treatment."

The explanation, delivered in Madame Didier's high thin voice, seemed sufficiently reasonable. Yet Mrs. Carfax was conscious of an under-current.

Her hostess was silent, but the Major, always garrulous, broke in with one of his pet grievances which lasted till the end of the meal, and ended by proving anew, through many ramifications, that the country was going to the dogs.

In the drawing-room, when coffee was

served after dinner, and her host had gone to the smoking-room, circumstances for Mrs. Carfax were more propitious.

Madame Didier took out her embroidery, and Mrs. Lovell lay back in an easy-chair, and warmed her feet at the fire.

"Helen has been telling me a good deal about this Mrs. Dakin," she began.

Her tone suggested that further confidences might be expected from Mrs. Dakin's friend, and Mrs. Carfax sat upright in her chair, and leant forward a little.

"Oh, but if Mrs. Carfax is a friend——" objected Madame Didier.

"Well, dear, so are you," put in Mrs. Lovell, who as Mrs. Carfax suddenly decided was really quite stupid.

Madame Didier's offended expression might portend anything—even silence.

Innocent of psychology, Mrs. Carfax could not be expected to know that on this score, at least, she need have no apprehension.

"Of course I am Madge's friend," said Madame Didier, stitching very fast, "and that's why I am so distressed at her foolish behaviour."

"What has she——?" Mrs. Carfax paused. It was perhaps safer not to interrupt.

"Oh only that she rather annoyed me by

flirting outrageously with a man who sometimes comes to our house. A man I don't like. But he's a friend of Louis's, and so I have to put up with him. A Monsieur Fontenelle."

"Why, I met him last spring, at a dinner-party!" interrupted Mrs. Carfax in surprise.

"So I heard."

The brief words were enigmatic in tone, and Mrs. Carfax gave an uncomprehending gasp.

"He's a celebrated man, as of course you know. He was made President of the International Art Congress this summer, here in London. And he's naturally a splendid painter. But he's not a nice man. Few Frenchmen are."

Madame Didier shut her thin lips, and bent over her embroidery.

"You mean——?" began Mrs. Carfax timidly.

"If he were an Englishman, he would have a very bad reputation. But in Paris—well!" Madame Didier shrugged her shoulders. "There's no such thing as morality. I need not tell you that *I* have never grown accustomed to it. I still keep my English ideas as to right and wrong."

"I'm thankful you do, dear Helen," murmured her aunt.

"I warned Madge," pursued her friend. "I told her all I had heard about him. Louis was angry with me, but I thought it my duty."

"But she hasn't——? I mean there isn't any danger of—of a divorce, or anything of that kind?"

Mrs. Carfax involuntarily lowered her voice to a horrified whisper.

"Oh no! no! Let us hope it won't come to that. Mind, I'm not accusing Madge of anything but foolish flirting. She made a dead set at him, I must say that. I don't believe that otherwise he would have taken any notice of her. But Madge is so vain. And then she has an idea she isn't happy with her husband. Well! a wife must make the best of the man she marries. I make a point of getting on with Louis."

"I'm sure you do, dear," interrupted her aunt. "You're so wise."

"But you think she's really staying on to ——?"

"I fear that the excuse of her illness is only half true. She's staying on I believe to—well, to go on with the flirtation, let us say."

Madame Didier laughed a little, and took a fresh thread of silk.

"Madge is a nice little thing, of course,

but she's very flighty. I can't help thinking that she must have fallen under some bad influence lately. She comes from *such* a good home. I used to stay with her at her father's house just outside York, when we were schoolgirls. The Etheridges are county people, you know. Not very rich, but well connected, and in the *niciest* set. No fastness or anything horrid of that sort. The right sort of quiet county people. You know what I mean. We rather thought she might have done better than a country doctor."

"Dr. Dakin is *extremely* well connected," put in Mrs. Carfax a little stiffly. He was a neighbour after all, and she felt that the slighting reflection might easily extend from the faculty, to the Church, of which her husband was so distinguished an ornament.

"Oh yes, I'm sure of it," Madame Didier hastened to reply. "And a clever man, I hear."

"Extremely clever. And devoted to his wife. This will be a terrible blow."

Mrs. Carfax leant back in her chair, and wondered whether she should write to George, or wait till her return. She decided to wait. A verbal recitation would be more effective.

"Oh! let us hope she will recover her senses and return to her home. I feel

terribly distressed about it, as it was in my house she met Monsieur Fontenelle."

"No! She met him first at Miss Page's," corrected Mrs. Carfax. "I *thought* he seemed very attentive that evening. He was talking to her a long time after dinner."

Madame Didier looked up sharply from her work.

"Who *is* this Miss Page?" she asked. "How does she come to know Monsieur Fontenelle?"

"She's a most charming woman. We are very proud of her at Dymfield. I suppose she met Monsieur Fontenelle abroad. She has travelled a great deal."

"Ah!" Madame Didier took another thread of silk, and matched it carefully.

"I only wondered," she went on, "because Madge was so reticent about her. Naturally, when I saw her becoming so very intimate with Monsieur Fontenelle, I inquired about the woman who was responsible for the first introduction. But I could gather nothing from Madge except that Miss Page was a beautiful woman, and apparently a paragon of all the virtues."

Madame Didier sniffed slightly, and began to fold up her work.

"She's certainly a striking looking woman,

and most generous and charitable," returned Mrs. Carfax. "My husband would not know what to do without her financial and other help, in the parish. Certainly we know very little about her life before she settled at Dymfield ten years ago," she added rather uncertainly.

"Good works are the modern equivalent for the convent, aren't they?" suggested Madame Didier.

"She's a charming woman," repeated Mrs. Carfax in a slightly dazed voice.

"No doubt. Yet I know one woman who doesn't describe her in those terms. Did you ever meet a Mrs. Crosby? No? Well, she is firmly convinced that Miss Page robbed her of her inheritance."

"If the doctor is at all wise, he will go and look after his wife," suggested Aunt Laura, her remark making a timely but unconscious diversion.

"I'll see what I can do," observed Mrs. Carfax with significance.

Madame Didier looked a little alarmed. "Please don't mention my name!" she begged. "Remember I have said nothing, and that, only in Madge's interest."

"Discretion is my strong point," returned Mrs. Carfax with dignity. "I am no gossip,

and the last thing in the world I should wish to do, is to make mischief."

"You are always so wise, dear Mary," murmured Mrs. Lovell.

The ladies talked till a late hour, and Mrs. Carfax went to bed full of an excitement which she was shocked to recognize as distinctly pleasurable.

XI

TIRING a little of hotel life, Anne had taken an apartment on the heights close to the Church of the Trinita dei Monti.

In her sunny room overlooking the city, in the intervals between her rambles, or the interchange of visits, she spent quiet happy hours. In Rome, as in no other Italian city, time slipped back, and the life of twenty years ago seemed often more real, more tangible, than her existence of to-day.

Over and over again, in Rome, she was startled to find herself living not in the present, but in the memory of an unforgettable past.

One morning, in walking through the Farnesina Palace, she stopped before a window to look down upon a narrow walled garden. The paths were mossy and weed-grown; the whole place pervaded by that air of neglect and decay, common to Italian gardens. But at the end of the enclosed oblong space, there was a beautiful old gate of marble. Orange trees in rows, ran the length of the right-hand

wall, and between the glossy leaves, the fruit shone golden. In the centre grass plot, amidst the long unkempt grass, there were rose bushes with pale pink monthly roses upon them ; and overhead a roof of sky blue as the heart of a gentian.

Miss Page turned her head quickly, a half smile upon her lips, as though to speak to some one at her side.

It was twenty years since she had looked down upon that quiet garden, but the illusion of a bygone day was so strong, that she expected to meet a responsive smile.

The summer of which François Fontenelle had spoken to his friend, as he sat beneath Anne's portrait, was the summer which followed her visit to her brother and his wife.

Anne had returned with her inner life wrecked and shattered. Her peace of mind was gone. She spent no more quiet days in the library with her books. A feverish restlessness drove her out of doors, where while daylight lasted, she worked among her plants, digging, weeding, planting with such energy that from sheer physical fatigue, she forced herself to sleep dreamlessly till morning renewed her toil. She was uninterrupted. No

one disturbed her. She had nothing else to do.

In spite of her protestations, Mrs. Burbage who had been growing steadily feebler through the winter, sent for a hospital nurse, and finally kept her bed.

"I will be looked after by the right people," she declared with characteristic determination. "Trained nurses are the right people to tend the sick. I can afford to pay for them, and I will have them. You have had enough waiting upon invalids, my dear."

Freed from nearly all her customary duties, therefore, Anne had the long spring days before her, and with the instinct of her healthy nature, she strove by hard physical work, to fill them, and at the same time to crush out the mental malady which tore at her heart.

"It's a disease, but work will kill it," she told herself.

And she set her teeth, and worked.

She worked ; but she was burdened with a great fear and a great regret.

Immersed in books, as for the last five years she had become, she had not hitherto noticed the isolation, the narrowness of her life.

Not only had she failed to miss the intercourse of her fellow creatures, she had actually dreaded their approach.

Filled with a nervous mistrust of her own power to please, she had shunned humanity as represented by any living soul outside the gates of Fairholme Court.

"I know nothing about any one," was the dreary burden of her thoughts. "I don't understand anything about real men and women. My own life is empty, and so for me, the lives of others are empty too. I have nothing to say to them, no help to give them, I'm useless in a world of which I know nothing except at second hand. And as I grow older my heart will dry up and wither more and more, till I'm an old maid—the conventional old maid."

She planted her sad thoughts with the beds of lilies; she dug them into the ground round the rose-bushes; and serenely, mockingly, the garden flourished and broke gradually into a flood of bloom.

It had never looked so beautiful as on the day when Mrs. Burbage's maid came to her while she was watering the new rose hedge round the sundial, to say that visitors had called, and her mistress wished Miss Page to receive them.

The lilac bushes were cascades of amethyst bloom; the hawthorn trees were dazzling white, or rosy to their utmost branch. Anne had broken off great sprays of blossom which lay at the foot of the sundial, ready to be taken into the house.

She picked them up, and full of consternation and trembling shyness, made her way across the lawn, and entered the drawing-room by one of the long French windows.

It seemed to her that the room was full of men, and she put out her hand blindly to the tallest of them, murmuring incoherent words.

"I am René Dampierre," he said. "I'm so sorry Mrs. Burbage is ill. She knew my mother, and me too when I was a child. I should like to have seen her."

The words, spoken with the faintest foreign accent, were quite fluent, and the voice was beautiful, the gentlest man's voice Anne had ever heard. She ventured to look at him, and involuntarily she smiled, her confidence restored.

He was very tall, she noticed, and big, and bronzed to the roots of his thick straw-coloured hair. His eyes were brown. Even at the moment, Anne was conscious of surprise. She had expected them to be blue. But they were eyes which drove away her shyness, and she

was able to shake hands calmly with his friends as he introduced them.

"This is François Fontenelle, a painter like myself. And this is Thouret, who writes very bad verse and worse novels, and this is Dacier who does everything—also very badly. All my friends. And you—Mademoiselle?"

"I am Anne Page," she said, and to her her own amazement, she laughed.

They all looked so friendly, and they were not at all alarming.

"Anne Page? That is a Shakespeare name!" exclaimed the young man whom Dampierre had first introduced.

"Shakespeare?" repeated Dacier. "*Ah! Si je pouvais seulement parler Anglais, mademoiselle!*"

"I can speak a little French," said Anne timidly. "But you musn't laugh at my accent."

They surrounded her then, talking a babel of mixed French and English, and Anne found herself laughing with them, as she tried to reply to their questions.

"May we see the garden?" asked René Dampierre presently. "Oh no! don't put down the flowers! I would offer to take them, but if they are not in your way, do carry them. They are just right."

"Oh yes! the goddess of the garden must keep her flowers," insisted Dacier.

Anne kept them uncomprehendingly, since her compliance seemed to please her guests.

She was mystified. But they were all friendly and kind, and easy to entertain. She had spoken to few men in her life, and she did not know there were any like these. It was a new sensation to be addressed with deference, and regarded with attention.

Never before had Anne felt flattered, and the sensation was agreeable.

She took them to her rose garden, and showed them the quaint old sundial, which, at her instigation, the gardener had brought from an outhouse in which she had discovered it, and set up in a space enclosed by clipped yews.

She showed them her borders of snowy pinks, with the lavender bushes behind them, and the garden she was making, a fancy of her own, (new then,) in which only Shakespeare's flowers should grow.

"There are a great many, you see," she told them. "And such nice old-fashioned plants. Rue and marjoram, and lavender, and marigolds. I love marigolds, don't you? They won't come yet, though."

"No. They are 'flowers of middle

summer,” quoted Monsieur Fontenelle. “You see I know your Shakespeare,” as Anne turned to him with a smile of pleased surprise.

“And the ‘*daffodils that come before the swallow dares*’ are nearly over,” said Dampierre. “But you still have some pale primroses and the violets. . . . Now don’t try to show off, François, because *I* want to! . . . ‘*Violets dim, but sweeter than the lids of Juno’s eyes or Cytherea’s breath.*’”

“You are wonderful!” laughed Anne. “You are Frenchmen, but you know *The Winter’s Tale!*”

“I ought to. I have been brought up chiefly in England,” returned Dampierre. “But Fontenelle is a disgusting genius. He knows the literature of all languages by instinct. He was born knowing them. In his nurse’s arms he terrified his relations by babbling in English, Italian, Spanish, Hebrew and Arabic.”

Anne laughed again. “Then he would like to see the library,” she said. “I will take you there presently. I’m glad you approve my Shakespeare garden,” she added, with a touch of the shyness she had almost forgotten.

“It’s delicious!” declared René. “That old wall as a background, and the mass of

wallflowers — gillyflowers, Shakespeare calls them, doesn't he? And the beds of violets! The scent of it all! It smells of England. And I love England, because it's my mother's and Shakespeare's country."

"You have some of your own flowers growing here," he added, stooping towards a bed of double narcissus, and glancing up at Anne with a smile.

"My own flowers?" she repeated, puzzled.

"Don't you know the country name for these?" He was still smiling. "*Sweet Nancies.*"

"And in Shakespeare your name is 'sweet Anne Page,'" added Fontenelle, "the prettiest English name in the world."

A faint colour came to Anne's face. She glanced from one to another with a look half shy, half pleased, half pitiful.

It gave place to a little movement of dignity.

"I'm glad you like my name," she said.

In her voice there was a suggestion of fear. The fear that these strange yet pleasant young men were laughing at her. She took them across the sunny lawn, where the beech tree's silken leaves had still the freshness of spring. A thousand birds were singing and calling. The scent of the lilac hung in the

air, and the hawthorns were drenched in fragrant snow.

Before the irregular charming front of the house, the men paused, and breaking into French, poured out ecstasies of praise.

"Ravissant ! Quelle belle ligne ! Que c'est délicieux !"

"This is the library," said Anne, as the men followed her through the open window into the dim beautiful room.

It was the one room in the house unspoilt by modern furniture ; left just as it had been in her old friend's day, with its high-backed chairs of gilded Spanish leather, its heavy rich curtains at the window, and the books reaching from floor to ceiling, their bindings of calf and leather forming the most harmonious of decorations. Simultaneously, the men uttered exclamations of delight.

Fontenelle rushed to one of the shelves, and became absorbed in the titles of the books which he read aloud, calling to his companions now and again, when he had discovered a treasure. René Dampierre stood in the embrasure of one of the windows, with Anne.

"Do you read these books ?" he asked, smiling down at her.

"Yes," said Anne, simply. "I read them

for nearly five years. But I haven't read anything lately," she added, involuntarily.

"No? Why not?"

Again the colour rushed to her cheeks, and her companion, suddenly curious, wondered what he could have said to destroy her composure.

"I don't know," she answered hurriedly. "I have been so busy in the garden. Shall we have tea out of doors? It's quite warm enough."

She left him to give the order, and when the library door closed, François abandoned the books, and crossed the room to him.

"But she's charming!" he exclaimed, speaking in English. "Isn't it an unusual type? That clear pale face and the soft hair, and the soft voice? I shall get her to sit for me."

"She's accustomed to be thought exceedingly plain," remarked Dampierre.

Fontenelle made an impatient gesture.

"By the usual idiot perhaps. How do you know?"

"By her manner. She hasn't any of the airs of a pretty woman. She thought we were laughing at her just now, in the garden."

"If we made her think herself pretty, *mon cher*, she'd surprise us all. There are a thousand possibilities in that face."

"*Allons!* I for one am quite ready,"

laughed Dampierre. "I believe you're right. She could be beautiful, though she's not young. What do you think? Thirty-two, thirty-three?—or more?"

François shrugged his shoulders. "It doesn't matter. She's one of the women for whom age doesn't count—except as an improvement."

"An unusual case."

"Of course. But she's unusual. I'm going to paint her."

"Tea's ready," said Anne, appearing again at the window. "It was in the drawing-room, so I just had it carried out."

She was quite at her ease now, and tea was a delightful meal under the flickering shade of the beech tree.

The men praised her French, inquired how she had learnt it so well; laughed and chattered; and finally took their leave, with many invitations to Anne. She must come to their studio, which was really only a barn. She must come to tea at the Falcon Inn. It was quite worth seeing. Above all, they must come back to the most charming garden in the world.

"*Pour revoir la déesse du jardin,*" added Thouret, lifting his hat with a flourish, as she stood in the porch, watching their departure.

XII

"So René Dampierre has grown into a handsome man, has he?" said Mrs. Burbage, when Anne went to her room.

She was sitting up in bed, with a shawl thrown round her shoulders.

Her face was yellow and pinched, but the eyes that looked out from under the wasted forehead, were sharp and keen as ever.

"Well! so he ought. His mother was a beautiful creature, and his father was well enough, as men go. Jacques Dampierre was quite a celebrated man in Paris, thirty years ago, when I used to visit them. A writer; a novelist, I believe. I never read any of his books. In those days it wasn't considered the correct thing for young women to read French novels. And quite right too. They're all disgraceful.

"René's a painter, you say? Well! much good may it do him. He won't make money that way, though I suppose he must have come into a decent income through his father. He's an only son."

"His father is dead then?" Anne asked.

"Yes, my dear, dead long ago. He died a year after his wife, and that's fourteen years now. She was a Leslie, one of the old stock, and as I say, a lovely girl. Fair, is he? Like his mother then. Hers was the only real gold hair I ever saw. And she had brown eyes, like a deer, or a fawn, or some creature of that sort."

Anne remembered the brown eyes that ought to have been blue. He had his mother's eyes as well as her hair then, evidently.

"Let me see, René must be twenty-seven or twenty-eight by this time," the old lady went on. "I haven't seen him since he was a baby of five or so. He was a pretty boy, then. They sent him over here to be educated, at that Catholic place. Beaumont isn't it? He ought to be quite an Englishman, and I hope he is."

"Well, he speaks English perfectly, with only the very slightest accent. But I don't think he's at all like an Englishman," said Anne. "In manner, I mean," she added.

"Humph! More's the pity. I don't like foreigners."

Anne was silent. She thought she did.

"He brought friends, you say? Well, tell them to come whenever they like, my dear. You're quite old enough to look after them.

Catherine Leslie—Dampierre, I mean, was a good friend to me. I should like to show hospitality to her boy.”

She turned over on the pillow, her voice growing weak.

“That will do, Anne. Nurse will see to me. I can’t talk ten minutes now without this dreadful faintness.”

The nurse came up to the bed, and Anne stepped aside, pausing at the door, to throw a pitying glance at the sharp profile against the pillow.

The old lady was growing visibly weaker, and Anne sorrowed. She was so lonely, so desolate at the end of life. Childless, almost friendless, for brusque and downright in manner, she had never possessed the happy art of engaging the affection of others, she was going down to the grave almost unregarded.

Few of her own generation were alive, and with the younger race she concerned herself but little. Anne knew that she had a nephew, her sister’s child. She had occasionally spoken of him as her heir, generally with the dry comment that she grudged him the money.

“He’s a great gaby,” she often declared, “and his vulgar wife will make ducks and drakes of my fortune.

"But there, my dear, what does it matter? In the place where I go there's neither knowledge nor understanding. It will be all the same to me."

Anne left the sick-room, and from force of habit, wandered out into the garden.

"How lonely! How desolate!" she found herself thinking.

"And I shall be just as lonely, just as desolate when it comes to my turn."

She turned her face towards the quiet evening sky, in which, despite one or two trembling stars, the flush of sunset still lingered, and again despair fell like a cold hand upon her heart.

All the afternoon she had felt so gay. She had been amused, interested, almost flattered.

Now the words she had just heard, recurred to her. "Tell them to come. You are quite old enough to look after them."

A sudden miserable sensation of shame assailed her, to remember how young she had felt. In welcoming her visitors, she had not thought of her age at all. She had accepted them as equals and contemporaries.

The blinding tears which made her stumble on the path already dim with twilight, caused her to bow her head with the instinct of hiding them even from herself.

"I'm quite old—quite old," she repeated with something that was partly a sob, partly a shiver. "They didn't make me feel it, because they are kind, and they have charming manners. But they are young, and life is all before them. It's all over for me—and I've never had it."

The bats skimmed noiselessly past her, in the dusk. All the birds had ceased singing. It was nearly dark, but with a horror of returning to the house, of being shut within four walls, Anne sat at the foot of the sundial, and in the darkness her tears fell.

Yet next morning, in the sunshine, when René Dampierre came to ask her to the "studio," it seemed not only easy, but natural, to smile, and be well pleased. When she found herself with her new friends, depressing thoughts fled like magic.

They were so obviously glad to see her. They interested her so much with their discussions, their enthusiasm, their talk, fresh and new to her, of methods, and values and style, in painting, in writing, in music, in the whole world of art to which hitherto she had travelled alone ; speechless, like a ghost amongst ghosts.

From the outset, Anne saw that René

Dampierre was regarded with a certain admiring respect by his companions. Already he was considered a great man; already they looked up to him as a leader, an authority.

Little by little, emerging from her provincial ignorance, she realized that a world of art existed in Paris, in which these young men had already made a place for themselves, and were recognized. From the first, it was chiefly through François Fontenelle that her imagination began to work, began to construct the life, the surroundings, the whole framework of existence, with its modern thought, its ideals, its ambitions, out of which her friends had for a moment stepped into the stagnant peacefulness of this English village. It was with François that she talked most easily. His fluent speech, his gift of picturesque narration and description, led her to realize a new world; gave sight to her eyes, gave her understanding.

Thouret and Dacier were delightful boys, younger by three or four years than the other two friends.

Anne liked them heartily, and was amused by their boyish high spirits, and nonsense talk, but her real interest was with François Fontenelle, and René Dampierre.

With René, her shyness lasted longer than

with the others, and often as she searched her mind for the reason, she could never determine it, except that as she incoherently put it to herself, he was "so absurdly good-looking."

His manner to her was charming, more charming perhaps than the manner of any of the others, though they all treated her with that flattering air of mingled deference and admiration to which she was growing accustomed. But despite herself, the little tremor of confusion when René addressed her, never ceased to trouble and embarrass her. In the company of François she was at her ease; interested, pleased, serene, ready to talk or to listen. René alone, though she loved him to talk to her, longed for it in fact with an intensity for which she often despised herself, never succeeded in effacing a secret inexplicable dismay.

The days passed on. May slipped into a radiant June. It was a brilliant summer, warm and sunny, the first happy summer Anne had ever known.

Early in their acquaintance Fontenelle had asked her to sit to him, and out of doors, in the garden of Fairholme Court, he made sketch after sketch.

He was always dissatisfied.

"It isn't right!" he exclaimed time after

time. "You are the most elusive creature in the world. I don't think I know you well enough yet to get down what I want. But some day I will paint you. You are going to make my fortune!"

"Then you must come again—many times," Anne said.

Even while she spoke, her smile died.

Next summer, who could tell where she might be? She could not blind herself to the seriousness of her friend's illness.

And when she was gone?

Anne refused to look forward. Once long ago, Mrs. Burbage had told her she need not be anxious about the future.

"I shall see that you don't starve, my dear," she had said.

But Anne realized that her life would be very different. It would probably mean facing the world once more in some sort of struggle for existence, without the companionship, which quiet unemotional as it was, meant all she had ever known of a friendly home, and human affection.

Often as these reflections assailed her, she put them from her. This was her summer. She would not spoil it by thinking of cold rain and wintry days.

It was while she was sitting to François

that they talked most; and always sooner or later, the conversation centred upon René Dampierre.

"He has genius," François assured her with the generous enthusiasm of an artist for work that is beyond his own powers.

"We are all desperately excited about René's career. He will be great, as Corot, as Daubigny are great. He is the coming man. You will see. In ten years time, he will be a leader, the founder of a new school of painting; a great power in France. Oh! we're going to be proud of René! Unless, of course," he added with a change of tone, "he plays the fool. There's always that to fear with him. He must let women alone. They're the very devil for smashing up a man's work; and that's René's weak side. He's a fool about women. Just the sort of sentimental fool who's capable of marrying one of them. And if he does——" Fontenelle's shrug of the shoulders and the gesture of his disengaged hand, completed the sentence.

"Why?"

Anne was accustomed to frank conversation from François Fontenelle. He discussed his own love affairs with perfect freedom. He told her of the adventures of his acquaintances in Paris, and with a Frenchman's love of

analysis, entered into long discussions on the psychology of love and passion.

Anne listened calmly. Ignorant as she was, except through her reading, of the phase of existence he described, she had by this time grown to form a very fair idea of the emotional life of the men in her friend's set in Paris. Much of what François said, she heard with incomprehension, not of the facts, but of the feelings to which they corresponded. She was neither shocked nor surprised. François' conversation never offended her. He talked to her frankly as to a grown woman of intelligence, and she accepted his confidences as simply as they were offered.

As yet, Anne knew little about herself. It had never occurred to her to analyze her own temperament. Throughout her life it never occurred to her, and in this circumstance lay the secret of a certain simplicity which to her dying day she preserved.

It never struck her that her character, formed in a seclusion unaffected by the clash of argument and conflicting ethical opinion, was wide and generous, and original. Free-thinking in the true sense of the word, inasmuch as her thoughts were her own, uncoloured by the prejudices and predilections of any sect or party. Her life had been forced into a narrow

channel, but quite spontaneously, quite naturally, her nature accepted a wide outlook, and extended sympathy and tolerance to lives and standpoints of necessity different from her own.

To many men apparently, love as she had dreamed of it, was an utterly different conception from that she had formed for herself. She accepted the fact, merely trying to understand.

"Why?" she repeated. "He might find the right wife."

François smiled as he looked up from his drawing, and met her blue eyes, candid as a child's, but a woman's eyes nevertheless.

"Sweet Anne Page!" he exclaimed. "Why shouldn't he find the right wife? The chances are a million to one against it. Even if she exists. She would have to be a miracle of self-sacrifice and comprehension, and tact and wisdom, if she were not to stand in his way. René is an artist to his finger tips, and if only out of consideration for women, no great artist should marry. No! René must always love and ride away. And the women he loves must be those who are accustomed to see the cavalier depart, without grieving. The women who merely look out for the next."

Anne was silent. It was a way of love

she did not understand. Yet she could imagine its existence.

"Men must be very different," she said after a long pause. That sort of thing would hurt a woman so much. One sort of woman, I mean. I think it would kill the best in her, so that if she were doing any work like painting, for instance, far from helping her, it would *prevent* her from doing as well as she might."

"Men *are* different. Most men. And if women would only recognize the fact, there would be fewer tears. Love is your whole existence, as one of your poets says, I believe. Bryon, is it? For us it's often an episode,—more often a series of episodes. Sometimes, rarely, the other thing. But that for an artist is not a consummation to be desired. Think! His whole existence! What becomes of his work if it's merged in the life of one woman? Why it goes to pot, of course," he went on with one of his rapid descents into English slang, which combined with his foreign accent always made Anne smile.

"No, that's the price an artist pays—if it's a heavy price, which I doubt," he added with the cynicism of youth. "No absorbing loves for him. Love is necessary for his imagination, of course. It fires him with enthusiasm. It gives him delight and gaiety, and bestows on

him the joyous mind to work. But if he's a wise man, no absorbing passions. Above all, no ties."

Anne sighed. "I see what you mean. But it seems that art is very cruel."

"It is."

"Then I think if what you say is true, an artist ought to keep out of the way of any woman who—cares. But he wouldn't if she pleased him," she added softly.

François laughed. "In your wisdom you have divined the natural selfishness of man," he said.

As the months passed slowly on, a change, or rather a development gradual but steady, was taking place in Anne's nature, a development that presently made itself manifest in her appearance, in her attitude, in her demeanour, physical as well as mental.

Slowly but surely, she was waking to the consciousness of her womanhood, and of her power.

The men whom she had grown to know intimately, regarded her with obvious admiration.

In their eyes at least, the eyes of artists, it was evident that she was not as she had hitherto imagined, destitute either of beauty or of attractive charm.

Ah! Voilà sweet Anne Page! She had grown used to the frequent exclamation when she appeared in the garden in which at Mrs. Burbage's desire they were always free to come and go as they pleased.

It no longer made her feel embarrassed and uncertain as to its sincerity.

Her friends' admiration for her had become a sort of cult. She was a new type, a woman to be praised—discreetly, with deference—yet praised. They brought to her the incense of a sincere flattery, and to Anne, starved of affection unconsciously waiting for love, it was very sweet.

She accepted it humbly, gratefully, with a surprise as great as her pleasure. But it could not fail to produce results.

She began to take pains with her dress, and her natural taste made it easy to adapt the simple gowns she possessed, into becoming garments. When René Dampierre exclaimed how well something suited her, she went to the glass and looked at herself with innocent gratification and astonishment to find that he was right.

Her eyes grew softly bright. There was often a faint colour in her cheeks.

Even to the unobservant conventional bystander, that summer Anne was charming. If

she scarcely recognized herself when she saw her reflection in the glass, the change in her mental personality still further surprised her.

By degrees, so slowly, so insensibly that it seemed a natural process, she had found herself, and in making that discovery, she had made others.

These men who had seemed so strange and wonderful at first ;—beings from another planet, whose thoughts she did not understand, whom she watched with interested amazed eyes, became in one sense very simple people. People easily swayed and managed by a woman older than themselves, a woman naturally intuitive, but hitherto deprived of the opportunity of exercising gifts of which she had only recently become aware.

Her conversations with François Fontenelle, as well as her previous wide reading, had removed her ignorance of facts. The rest, now that she was freed from the shackles of self-mistrust, lay well within her natural powers.

To François Fontenelle, a quick observer, even then a man of the world, possessed of the keen and subtle intelligence which in later years was to stand him in good stead for the promotion of his material prosperity, the change was early discernible. He viewed it with secret amusement, and inasmuch as he

felt himself to a large extent responsible, some pride, and finally a touch of uneasiness.

It was as though some gentle creature too inexperienced to know its strength, had unexpectedly without in any way losing its gentleness, become dangerous. Dangerous to itself, dangerous perhaps to others. He often found himself glancing uncertainly at René, and then reassuring himself by recalling his friend's natural instinctive manner to women.

René was always a great success with women. His voice altered when he spoke to them; his attentions were very charming.

François had heard the voice, and witnessed the attentions many times before, and they had never meant anything more than the sort of thing which according to him, in the wisdom of his sapient youth, was "all right." The love of a few weeks; at most, a few months. Nothing in short that from his point of view could affect the artist seriously, or jeopardize his position. Why then should he feel uneasy? Except of course, that this was a different matter. Anne's was not the usual case; he could imagine no one further from the type of woman who with *sang-froid* watches the departing cavalier.

The idea was preposterous, ludicrous to entertain side by side with the idea of Anne

Page. If Anne fell in love—heavens! if Anne fell in love!

His brain almost ceased working at the bare notion.

“René would be done for,” he reflected incoherently. “I know his idiocy where women are concerned. And if a woman like Anne Page falls in love, there’ll be the devil to pay! He’d have to marry her. A woman years older than himself. And then exactions, tears, jealousy of him, of his work. Oh awful! Horrible!”

His rage at the bare possibility of such an event extended at moments to Anne. “I know these gentle women!” he told himself vindictively. “They’re worse than any of them, when it comes to a love affair. Tenacious, determined, implacable——”

And then Anne would enter the drawing-room to welcome him, or come across the grass. Anne with her sweet gay smile, and her gentle dignity, and his anger died.

It was all right, of course. What a fool he had been! The idea had never occurred to either of them, and all he had to do was to keep his preposterous notions to himself.

Moreover, September had arrived, and the time for the return of the whole party to Paris was approaching.

René certainly seemed in no hurry to depart. But that was comprehensible.

He was working hard, and as François allowed, never had he worked better. There was a tenderness and grace in his landscapes which was new to them, inspired he said by the gracious beauty of Shakespeare's county.

But he had finished the picture upon which lately all his efforts had been concentrated, and François was already urging that it was time to go.

They were all in the garden one afternoon, when the subject was first mentioned.

"This is delicious, charming, adorable!" exclaimed François, suddenly looking from the lawn across the level meadows, over which the sun was setting. "It has been a summer snatched out of Paradise. But we must be getting home to our daily toil."

Tea was over, but the table, laden with silver and dainty china, had not yet been removed.

Anne sat near it, in a basket chair, an open book on her knee, from which at the men's request she had been reading.

Her white muslin dress with its froth of frills trailed on the grass.

The muslin fichu crossed in front and knotted at the waist, revealed a glimpse of her long white throat.

Despite himself, François glanced at her curiously.

Her face was unmoved, but he fancied he detected the faintest tremor of the frills at her breast.

René was lying in a hammock slung beneath the beech tree, and the two younger men lay on the grass, smoking.

François' remark was greeted with a torrent of invective from them.

Paris be consigned to everlasting perdition ! It was still summer. Why talk of going ?

René was silent. He raised himself in the hammock, and with half-closed eyes, looked at the evening fields.

"What a beautiful effect," he said at last. "Look there, where the mist is rising. I must get that. There's a picture."

"You've finished your picture, *mon vieux*," returned François, speaking in French. "I know the history of another one. You'll mess about, and paint out, till the snow is on the ground. There isn't time. No ! The hour has arrived to pack up."

"We can't leave sweet Anne Page !" declared Dacier half seriously. He turned on his elbow, and glanced up at her, smiling. Without speaking, Anne returned his smile.

"She looks like an early Italian Madonna

disguised as a Reynolds portrait," thought François suddenly. "Why on earth has she grown so ridiculously attractive!" was his next irritable reflection.

"She must come to Paris," declared Thouret.

"But of course she must come to Paris! When will you come, Mademoiselle Anne? At once, won't you? It's a magnificent idea. We'd take her to the Elysée Montmartre and to the Nouvelle Athènes. Yes! And to Versailles! Versailles in the autumn. Magnificent! And the little streets in Montmartre, and the Place Pigale! Seriously wouldn't it be splendid to show our Paris to Anne Page?"

They talked all together, exclaiming and laughing, François joining them.

Dampierre alone said nothing. He was still gazing over the fields, now smouldering with faint gold, from which here and there like incense, a ghostly mist was rising.

"There's a picture there," he repeated.

"Hang the picture!" exclaimed Dacier and Thouret together. "Mademoiselle Anne Page is coming to Paris. Aren't you, mademoiselle?"

Anne shook her head. "I never go anywhere." She was still smiling, but François felt a sudden pang of pity and compunction.

To his sensitive ear, the words were an epitome of Anne's life.

When it was growing dusk, they rose, and this evening Anne did not ask them to stay.

Often when it was dull, or too cold to sit in the garden, she took them into the library, showed them her favourite books, sometimes read to them. Because as Dacier said, it was good for their English accent, and she had such a beautiful voice.

To-day she walked with them to the porch, and said good-bye, in a tone that was as friendly as ever.

"Tell me when you decide to go," she said. "We must have a picnic or something for farewell."

François turned at the gate, and saw her standing in the porch, her dress startlingly white in the dusk. He shrugged his shoulders, but involuntarily the troubling sense of having wounded some defenceless creature, returned to him. He told himself that he was a sentimental fool, but the illusion did not vanish.

XIII

FOR the next week, Anne saw little of her friends.

The day after the suggestion for their departure had been made, the old doctor who attended Mrs. Burbage, asked to see her.

"I'm not satisfied with our patient's progress," he said, closing the library door with much precaution. "I think, Miss Page, I should prefer to have another opinion, and I propose writing to-night to Dr. Mears of Harley Street."

Anne listened with fear at her heart, and the next day, the specialist arrived from London.

After a lengthy visit, and a subsequent conversation between the doctors, she was told that the case was serious, and an operation would probably be necessary.

"Write to her relatives at once," advised Dr. Mears, taking up his hat. "I can't disguise from you that there's cause for anxiety."

Anne obeyed, and her letter was answered

by a telegram, announcing the arrival of Mrs. Burbage's nephew and his wife.

The intimation of their proposed visit was received by the patient with a grim smile.

"Let them come if they please," she remarked. "I don't propose to endure much of their society. I shall claim the privileges of a sick woman."

They arrived the same evening; Mr. Crosby, a weak-looking undecided man of forty, whose thin fair hair was plastered over a retreating forehead, and his wife, a stout somewhat vulgar woman, arrogant and overbearing.

The visit was not a success.

Mrs. Burbage, who once decided upon a course of action, remained characteristically obstinate, granted them one interview of ten minutes, after which her door was resolutely closed.

Mrs. Crosby, pleading solicitude for the relative who had always repulsed her advances, appealed to Anne, whom she at first treated with the superciliousness suitable to a dependent who had without doubt acquired for her own ends, a culpable ascendancy over the old lady's mind.

Three months previously, Anne would have been helpless in her hands; too nervous and

self-mistrustful to cope with a blustering woman of the world.

Now, scarcely to her own surprise, so insensibly had the change in her been wrought, to all Mrs. Crosby's attempted coercion, she preserved a self-possessed opposition.

Mrs. Burbage did not wish to see her nephew, or his wife.

That was enough. She did not see them. After two days which exercised all Anne's powers of tact and self-restraint, Mrs. Crosby returned to her Devonshire home, her husband in tow, infuriated and baffled by the quiet woman whose imperturable dignity still further roused her resentment.

"Mark my words Fred, that's a designing creature!" she exclaimed as they drove to the station. "She behaves as though she were mistress of the place. An ugly pale-faced woman like that!"

"My dear, I don't think her ugly exactly, and her figure is certainly very good," murmured Fred, whose folly was proverbial.

"Ridiculous!" panted his wife. "You're a perfect fool, Fred! I hope your aunt won't leave her a farthing. It would serve her right. Fortunately we know that the place and everything is yours, otherwise I should leave no stone unturned to get rid of that young person."

Anne was occupied next day with preparations for the removal of her friend to the nursing home in London decided upon by the doctors. Only the nurse accompanied her.

"No, my dear. I refuse to have you with me," she said authoritatively to Anne. "What's the use of dragging you to town when nurse does all I want? If they don't kill me between them, you shall come up and see me afterwards. I shall want a little change from doctors and nurses then. Just now, you'd only be in the way."

Anne drove with her to the station, and helped to arrange her comfortably in the invalid carriage.

"Good-bye, my dear," she said rather faintly, as Anne bent over her. She kissed her, and with one of her rare caresses, gently patted her hand.

"You're a good girl," she added. "If I get well, it will only be for the pleasure of seeing you again. You've got quite pretty, Anne. I always had a weakness for pretty people. Tell the young man, what's his name? —René, I'm sorry I didn't see him."

"He wanted to come to say good-bye," murmured Anne, trying to control her voice.

Mrs. Burbage shook her head, and her eyes closed.

"I can't talk to young people. I'm past it," she whispered. "Good-bye, my dear. God bless you."

The train moved slowly out of the station, leaving Anne on the platform, blind with tears.

She tried to remember that the London doctor thought the case by no means hopeless. In vain. She felt desolate and overwhelmed. She was alone—and her other friends were going too.

Resolutely Anne turned her mind from this last thought. She would not tell herself that it was because she dared not face it. They were going next morning; and in the afternoon they came to say good-bye.

Though late in the month, the day was fine and warm, and for the last time, tea was laid out of doors. Anne was very quiet and very pale.

Dacier and Thouret commiserated with her on the loss of her friend.

"But she'll get well. It's all right," they assured her cheerfully.

François unobserved, watched her carefully.

René was also very silent, and François was grateful for the high spirits of the two boys. They insisted before leaving, that Anne should give them each a flower from her Shakespeare garden.

The flowers of middle summer filled the borders now.

"Here they are, all of them!" said François. "Hot lavender, mints, savory, marjoram and marigolds."

"But none of you are middle-aged, so they are not for you," Anne returned.

She picked a late rose for each of them, Dacier and Thouret receiving theirs with extravagant delight.

"It shall be buried with me," Dacier exclaimed. "But not yet. I've got a few things to do first."

François groaned. "When I think of the reams of execrable poems I'm doomed to read before that!" he exclaimed as they strolled under the yellowing trees. "Look here! We must really go. I've got all my canvases to pack, and so has René."

"But it's only *au revoir*," declared Thouret. "Sweet Anne Page is coming to Paris. *C'est déjà une chose tout-à-fait entendue. Nous la menerons entendre Sara, et Mounet-Sully dans Hernani.*"

"We shall have her with us before the winter sets in. And then we shall come back next year," added Dacier.

"Good-bye," returned Anne simply, shaking hands with each of them in turn.

She walked back into the house when they were gone, noticing minutely, trivial things such as a little stain on the paint in the hall; a flower that had fallen out of a jar on the window ledge.

An hour later—when it was nearly dark, René Dampierre found her in the rose garden.

She stood quite still when she saw him coming, and waited for him to speak.

"I came back," he began, stammering a little. "The maid told me you were in the garden. I forgot this book. You lent it to me."

He held it out to her as he spoke. It was a little volume of Herrick.

"Keep it," Anne said. "It's mine."

Her voice was steady, but her hands were icy cold, and she was shivering.

He came close to her.

"May I? Then will you put my name in it, as well as yours? Here's a pencil."

She rested the book on the sundial, and bent low over it, perhaps because of the fading light.

"It's too damp for you out here, in that thin dress," he said in a low voice. "You're shivering." He touched her hand, and she shrank back against the sundial.

"Anne," he said, still more softly, and his

voice trembled. "Anne, I can't say good-bye. Promise that you'll come to Paris this winter. Promise! You will, won't you?"

He took both her cold hands, and suddenly put them to his lips.

It was too dark to see her face, but he heard her catch her breath, and when she spoke, he scarcely recognized her voice.

"Good-bye, René. I want you to go now. Yes, I mean it. Please go."

The words, so gently spoken that he knew he had not offended her, were full of the authority of a woman who expects to be obeyed. He hesitated a second, then bent his head again, and Anne felt him kiss the sleeve of her dress.

A moment later, she saw his tall figure pass like a darker shadow, through the shadows that hung round the gate in the wall. Long after all the light was gone, she stood where he had left her.

She knew why he had gone. Almost as though she had been present, she knew all the wisdom his friend François Fontenelle had that day been pouring into his ears. She pictured François' cold ironical anger if he knew, or if he came to know, of this second farewell. Bitterest pang of all, she knew that he was right.

She stood clasping her hands together.

"It's all too late—too late," she kept repeating unconsciously, shivering from head to foot.

Anne's prescience was not at fault. Late the same night, after the two younger men had gone to their rooms, Fontenelle sat in the parlour of the Falcon Inn, and discussed her with his friend.

"You've been a fool, my dear fellow," he remarked in his dryest tone. "I warned you not to go back. Why couldn't you let well alone?"

René sprang restlessly to his feet, and stood with his back to the fire which he had just lighted.

"You know well enough. Why do you ask absurd questions," he returned irritably. "It's no use talking. I know I'm a fool. But I can't get her out of my head."

François leant forward to tap his pipe against the brickwork of the fireplace.

"You must," he said shortly. "It's madness. This isn't a case for fooling. It's marriage—and suicide. If it were marriage *or* suicide you would be a wise man to choose the latter alternative," he added grimly.

René moved impatiently. "I know. I know. You needn't rub it in. But—she's adorable. I can't forget her."

François regarded him patiently. "My dear fellow," he said after a moment, "you may think you're in love, but do at least try to keep off arrant nonsense. You know as well as I do that you *will* forget her. That two months after you get back, she'll be an occasional sentimental memory, and that a year hence, you will never think of her at all."

René laughed shortly. "You're a detestable brute!" he exclaimed with the half wistful half amused smile of a spoilt child, which made part of his charm.

"And the worst of it is, you're always right. I don't want to marry her. I don't want to marry any one. I'm not the man to marry. I've got work to do. You're quite right. I was a fool to go back."

"And I suppose there was a love scene, and a declaration of sorts?"

François' voice was ironical, but there was anxiety under the light words.

"No." He grew suddenly grave. "She asked me to go—and I went."

There was a silence which lasted some minutes. The wood fire crackled, and the lamp illumined the comfortable room with its fifteenth-century beams overhead, its panelled walls and its red-covered sofa and chairs.

"Anne Page is not a woman to fool with,"

said François at last. He was thinking of what she had once said, sitting in the sunshine of the garden. "*Then an artist ought to keep out of the way of any woman who cares. But he wouldn't if she pleased him.*"

The memory of the last words touched him.

"She's not made for that sort of thing. It's not decent. It's not playing the game. Leave her alone, and she'll forget."

Even as he spoke, he wondered whether he spoke truth; but that was a question to be dismissed with a mental shrug.

"I dare say she's got nothing to forget," returned René gloomily. "I've no doubt she thinks I'm just a ridiculous young fool."

François did not reply.

"Women are strange things," pursued René presently. "They alter so. Anne has grown years younger,—and years older since we first saw her. She manages us now. Have you noticed?" He turned to the other man with a quick smile. "She couldn't have done that at first. She was too shy, and—what's the word?—diffident. And yet at first, did she seem a woman to fall in love with? I never thought of it. I believe we all looked upon her as an interesting creature, and thought ourselves rather fine fellows for discovering

her beauty,—which perhaps doesn't exist at all. She was something to paint, something to discuss——”

“Something to teach,” added François slowly.

He glanced at the clock. “Come along! Do you see the time? And we've got to start at seven to-morrow.”

He got up, and put his pipe in his pocket.

“The art of life, my dear young friend,” he remarked with burlesque sententiousness, as he turned out the lamp, “is to manage one's episodes carefully. And to see that they remain episodes.”

René did not reply. He remained seated in the armchair, after the light was out, staring at the still leaping fire.

XIV

THREE days after Mrs. Burbage went away, Anne received a telegram, summoning her at once to London. The hours spent in travelling, and reaching the nursing-home, passed like an uneasy nightmare, with a background of dread to be realized, and by the time she arrived at the house in Wimpole Street, her friend was unconscious.

She died a few minutes after Anne was admitted to her bedside.

Of the time that followed, Anne had no clear idea. She felt dazed and uncomprehending, and when by the end of the week, she found herself back again in the silent house at Dymfield, it was to wonder vaguely how she had arrived, and in what a solicitor's letter which awaited her, could possibly concern her.

The writer, who signed himself William Chaplin, expressed his intention of calling upon her next day, on business.

Anne received him the following afternoon,

standing before the fire in the library, very slim and tall in her black dress.

Instinctively she had taken refuge in this room, as the one place unconnected with Mrs. Burbage; the room that held no memories of her.

The grey-haired man who entered, shook hands with her rather impressively, and sat down, with the remark that she was no doubt acquainted with the contents of Mrs. Burbage's will.

"No," returned Anne, "except that I understood that everything was to go to Mr. Crosby, her nephew."

The lawyer glanced at her rather sharply.

"The last will is in your favour," he replied. "Everything is left to you unconditionally. This house—all my client's property—her real and personal estate. Everything in short."

Anne turned a shade paler. She did not understand, but she was aware that the little grey-haired man before her, was making what seemed to him at least, an important announcement.

At the end of half-an-hour's conversation, she followed him to the door, still unable to grasp the significance of his words.

"The will, as I say, is most simple," he

remarked. "Everything is quite straightforward, and we ought to be able to get the whole thing through speedily. In the meantime, I congratulate you, Miss Page," he added dryly. "Apart from the income, Fairholme Court is a most delightful residence." He glanced about him. "Most delightful," he added.

Anne shook hands with him, and went slowly back to the library.

Dinner was served as usual by the quiet maids, whose demeanour since the death of their mistress, had assumed an added shade of decorous gravity.

They liked Anne, and their manner towards her expressed a kindness and sympathy for which she was grateful.

To-night, she scarcely noticed their solicitude, and the dishes they set before her were taken away almost untasted.

She wandered into the library again after her lonely meal, and began to pace the floor aimlessly.

From time to time, she took a book from one of the shelves, opened it, glanced at a page that was meaningless, and unconscious of her action, replaced the volume.

The dry monotonous voice of the lawyer, re-echoed in her brain. He was saying words which signified nothing.

"Your income will amount to between four and five thousand a year."

Out of a mass of detail, it was only this she remembered, and at present it conveyed nothing to her mind.

She was conscious only of a feeling of loving gratitude that her friend had cared for her. Of what that care implied, in those first hours she realized nothing. She could only think of her last words at the station.

"If I get better, it will be for the pleasure of seeing you again."

Her eyes filled with tears as she remembered them.

Gradually the hours wore on. The servants went to bed, and the house was silent. Mechanically Anne piled fresh logs on the fire, and at last conscious of exhaustion from her ceaseless pacing of the room, she sank into a chair, and held her hands to the blaze.

She was a rich woman now, the lawyer had said so.

What did that mean? With all her strength Anne tried to translate the statement into comprehensible terms.

First of all, it surely meant freedom from anxiety. No weary heart-breaking toil for a bare existence. No painful counting of hard-earned shillings.

Then,—for the first time Anne felt a definite thrill of pleasure,—it meant the power to help her brother. Hugh should be made happy if money could compass it.

And afterwards? Well, the realization of some of her day-dreams. She could travel. The wonderful material world need no longer be a mirage, a prospect viewed only by the eye of faith and imagination. She might become the possessor of many beautiful things. Pictures, books, furniture, dress. She would have the power to help people; to relieve misery; to do some tangible good. Money was a talisman to unlock some of the exquisite secrets of the world.

Anne paused. Her thoughts, clear at last, and swiftly moving, were suddenly arrested.

Her wealth might do all this, but there was one joy it could not buy, and missing this, all the rest, all the wonders it could work, seemed dust and ashes. Dead Sea fruit. The time for love was gone, and it had become the one impossible, unattainable desire of her whole being.

Missing it, she would miss the meaning of existence.

The pageant of the world might be revealed, but it would be seen under the grey skies of common day; for ever unillumined by the light that never was on land or sea.

Again in her heart there rose the fierce pain, the sickening hunger she had experienced when for the first time in her life, she had seen the eyes of happy lovers.

Swiftly in bitter mockery, her memory placed her once more in the rose-garden, where a week ago René had kissed her hands, and spoken to her in the shaken voice she had never heard from a man's lips before.

If only she had been the girl to whom he ought to have been pleading! If only she had felt the right to say she loved him too. If only she had been the girl she longed to be, the wisdom of the wise would have seemed an idle song. She would have given him her love, freely, generously, without counting the cost, and the future might have taken care of itself.

But as it was——

Suddenly Anne rose to her feet. The colour surged up into her face; the warm blood raced through her body. She put her trembling fingers on the mantelpiece, to steady herself, and stood looking down into the fire.

As it was—why not?

She felt bewildered, dazed, giddy with the thought that had come to her, as emerging from a dark passage, one staggers in the glare of a brilliantly lighted room. Through the

dazzling incoherency of her idea, she clung to one certainty.

If René was not in love with her as she understood love, he was at least drawn to her as a man is drawn irresistibly to a woman. He had been in her hands that night. She could have done as she pleased with him.

Anne knew her power at last, and deliberately, for his sake, she had not used it. He had gone away. He would forget, of course—unless—— Slowly she sank into her chair, and sat thinking.

She thought through all her life. She thought of the never-ending days of childhood and youth, unlighted by any happiness, any hope; the dreary days which had killed at last even her dreams.

She thought of Hugh and his wife in a distant colony, happy, regardless of her, unmindful, unless she wrote to them, of her very existence.

She thought of the heart of despair which she had brought back to this very room six months ago, of the dumb certainty that life for her had been, was, and ever would be, empty of all gifts, of all delight. And then of the wonderful months that had just passed. Wonderful, because of all she had learnt of others—and of herself.

She remembered the diffident shrinking

creature, who for shyness could scarcely lift her eyes to the men she regarded with awe, as dwellers in another world, whether gods or devils she did not know.

She could have smiled as she thought of them now.

They were neither gods nor devils, but weak human beings like herself. Weaker than herself, since they were young, impressionable clay in the hands of the potter.

And one of them loved her.

She leant forward in her chair, and covered her face with her hands.

A week ago, it had been an obscure penniless woman who had found courage to arrest an impending declaration of love.

To-day, the same woman,—she was rich, her own mistress, independent, free.

With a wondering sense of the simplicity of the matter, Anne saw herself at liberty to take a step the very existence of which, till to-night, she had not perceived.

She sat immovable, staring into the fire, thinking. In the silence of the sleeping house she looked at facts face to face, and made her decision. Here was she, Anne Page, not only a rich woman and her own mistress, but practically alone in the world. Life had hitherto offered her nothing. Now if she had

courage to take it, a great if brief happiness was within her reach. She loved, and was beloved. Too late, as she had thought. But was it after all too late? Again Anne reflected while the fire upon which her unseeing eyes were fixed, leapt and sang softly to itself. Not if she could find the further courage to buy her happiness at a great price. To take it while it lasted, and of her own accord relinquish it before it had ceased to be happiness.

For as she thought and planned Anne saw clearly, as only a woman who is leaving her youth behind, can see clearly—without illusions, with only stern facts to guide her.

René Dampierre was young. Naturally, inevitably, sooner or later, he would turn to youth for love, and she must not stand in his way.

But because of this, could she not even for a little while know the joy which was every woman's birthright?

If she were willing to pay for it, why not? Whatever happened, whatever misery was in store, at least she paid alone. She involved no one in her debt.

A cynic might have smiled at the simplicity of her reasoning. Not one thought of her changed circumstances entered into her reflections. She did not consider that Anne Page the penniless companion was a very different being

from Anne Page the lady of great means. To her mind it only affected the situation in so far that it gave her freedom ; made it possible for her to follow her own course without burdening man, woman, or child. It was only courage that was necessary. Courage to stake high, and not to shrink when sooner or later the odds should turn against her.

She measured her strength, and made her decision.

The little clock on the mantelpiece struck three, with a shrill silvery clamour. Anne started, and glanced round the familiar room with a shock of surprise, as though she had been long away, and was astonished to find it there.

As she rose slowly to her feet, her reflection in the glass above the chimney-piece also startled her.

It seemed to her that for ages she had been out of the body also.

She met absorbed blue eyes in a face pale but transfigured by an inner excitement and a great hope.

She saw a mouth sweet and tremulous, and a tall figure ; very graceful, really beautiful ; and suddenly she smiled.

"It's not absurd. Not yet," was the certainty that suddenly filled her with triumphant joy.

XV

EARLY in November, Dampierre burst one morning into Fontenelle's studio. They worked in the same house in the Rue Notre Dame des Champs, René on the top floor, François two flights lower down.

He looked up as his friend came in

"Yes. I know. She's coming," he said, without ceasing to paint. "This background's the very devil. It's all wrong in tone."

"How did you know?"

François nodded towards a side table.

"There's her note."

Dampierre found it amongst a litter of brushes and palettes.

"Yes," he said glancing over it, "she says the same thing to me. She feels she wants a change, so she's shut up the house for a time, and she'll stay in Paris possibly on her way elsewhere. That's all she tells me."

"The old lady must have left her some money," observed François, still apparently engrossed with his background. "Looks as

though it's rather more than enough to keep body and soul together, doesn't it?"

"Oh, do shut up, and leave that damned picture alone, and be sympathetic!" exclaimed René, irritably.

His eyes were bright, and he laughed rather excitedly.

"I know you're sick she's coming. But I can't stand your wisdom any longer. I'm glad, do you hear? Glad. Glad. *Glad!* And there's an end of it."

"Pardon me, but that's just what it's not," returned Fontenelle.

"Very well then, it isn't. And I don't care. I only know I want to see her again,—horribly. And she'll be here to-night, thank goodness, and I'm going to meet her at the station."

François shrugged his shoulders, and continued to paint.

"Where's her hotel? Oh, the Impérial. She's got that out of Baedeker." He laughed.

"Come now, François. Own that sweet Anne Page in Paris will be rather nice!"

"You'd better ask her to tea here to-morrow. Your place is even more of a pig-sty than mine. We shall see Dacier and Thouret at the *Lilas* this evening. We can ask them then."

"All right. But I'm not going to have you about all the time mind!"

"You won't," returned his friend briefly. "I can't stand fools."

René's face darkened for a moment, but the retort died on his lips.

"Look here, old man," he urged. "Don't be a beast. I'm serious."

"*Tant pis*," was François' implacable reply.

But when next day Anne was actually in his studio, and he heard her voice, and saw her smile, and listened to the laughing clamour around her, as she sat in the only armchair that was not broken, and drank execrable tea out of a cup which did not match its saucer, it was difficult even for Fontenelle to be anything but gay and pleased.

With an odd mixture of sensations, he noticed how fair her skin looked against her black dress. The fur she wore on her shoulders was also exceedingly becoming. François, who as a painter of many women's portraits knew something of the cost of feminine apparel, looked at it with a certain surprise. Either the old lady had been fairly generous, or Anne in her one day's shopping, had been disgracefully extravagant. In either case the result was admirable. He emerged from his reflections to find a furious discussion raging as to which restaurant she should be taken to dine.

"*Café de la Régence*," said François authoritatively, "and afterwards we'll drive back to the *Lilas*."

It was several days before Anne found herself alone with René.

He came to her hotel one morning, and carried her off to lunch with him at a little restaurant in the neighbourhood of his studio.

"You have such a devoted body-guard, that I never get a word with you," he complained. "And I want you to see my pictures. We must get in before the light goes. It gets so confoundedly dark in the afternoons now."

Later on in the great gaunt studio at the top of the pile of buildings in the Rue Notre Dame des Champs, Anne stood before some of the pictures which in after years were to fetch great sums from art collectors, which were to be discussed by connoisseurs, to be execrated, loved, praised, condemned, admired.

She did not see them. For her at the moment, they were non-existent.

One thing only was in her mind ; one idea, and that in the form of a question.

How should she accomplish what she had come to do ?

This was the first time René had deliberately sought her alone, and in the circumstance,

without malice, she divined the influence of François Fontenelle.

He had meant to be careful. He had meant to see her only in the presence of others, but,—she knew him so well that she could have smiled,—to-day he had thrown prudence to the wind.

Tenderness was in his voice, in his eyes, even while he kept tender words from his lips.

It grew dusk while she lingered. The blue of twilight filled the windows, and a ruddy gleam from the stove lay along the floor. Anne sat down on the couch, and René settled cushions at her back.

His hand touched her arm, and for a moment it rested there, before he turned abruptly away.

Earlier in the day, Anne had spoken of returning to Dymfield.

“You musn’t go yet,” he broke out all at once. “You won’t leave Paris yet?”

The words were an appeal, and his voice was not steady.

“I came to see you,” said Anne deliberately.

He turned to her sharply. It was too dark to see his face, but she heard the anxiety in his tone.

“All of us—or me?”

“To see you.”

He threw himself on his knees beside her. "Anne," he whispered, "stay. I want you. Will you marry me?"

He had taken her hands and was holding them tight against his breast.

"No, René."

The words were decisive, but she made no effort to release herself, and her hands rested quietly in his.

"Sit here, beside me," she said, moving a little on the couch. "I want to talk to you."

Wondering at something in her voice, he obeyed in silence, and she went on speaking, still very quietly.

"I won't marry you, dear, because I'm too old for you. I will never marry you. But if you want me, I will stay."

In his amazement, he let her hands drop, and bent forward to see her face.

Quite quietly, Anne got up. "It's very dark," she said. "I'll light the candles. I saw where you put the matches."

He watched her in a sort of stupor as she went to a side table for the matches, and lighted one after another of the candles in a sconce on the opposite side of the room.

Did she know what she had said? Had he understood her?

He sat staring at her as she reached up to

the sconce, the movement throwing into relief the lines of her beautiful figure.

When the last candle was lighted, she turned to him smiling.

"No. You haven't misunderstood me," she said. "Now you can see my face you will know you have not."

She came swiftly across the room, and sat down beside him.

"Listen, René. I will not marry you, for many reasons. Two months ago I was prepared never to see you again. But things have altered. I haven't told you yet, but all my circumstances have changed. I'm a rich woman now, and my life is my own, to do what I like with it. And because I love you, I propose to give it to you, for a little while at least. As long as you want me. Until——"

Her voice, quite calm and quiet at first, broke at the last words, and she paused abruptly.

René sprang to his feet, and drew her quickly up from the sofa into his arms.

"Anne!" he cried. "Sweet Anne Page!" the words came brokenly between tremulous laughter. "You don't know what you're saying. You will marry me, of course, because we love each other, because——"

She put one hand on his shoulder, and so kept him at arm's length.

"I will never marry you," she repeated. "If you won't consent to let me stay as I suggest, I shall say good-bye to you now, and I will not see you again."

"Remember René, you're not talking to a girl. You're dealing with a woman who knows her own mind, and will have this or nothing. If I stay we both have perfect freedom. I am old enough to do what I please with my life. And I please to do this. René," for the first time the colour came to her cheeks, and her eyes wavered, "you'll make me shy if I have to ask you so many times to let me stay."

She looked suddenly so like a child as she spoke, that in spite of his perplexed amazement, Dampierre smiled.

He kissed her soft hair, and then her lips. "You're adorable," he murmured. "But you amazing woman, you're an *enfant terrible*! What *am* I to do with you?"

"Don't you see how simple it is?" she asked. "I'm rich now, so I can stay as long as you—as long as I please." She altered the pronoun hurriedly. "And you have plenty of money, too, René, haven't you? I mean that we are each quite independent. It makes it all so easy."

He laughed again as the only expression of his otherwise inexpressible emotions.

She was as guileless, as simple as a child. Yet she was proposing—— Good God, what was she not proposing? And above all she meant what she proposed; meant it absolutely. He looked into her eyes, and knew that no words of his would move her.

“But Anne, Anne!” he stammered. “You’re saying awful things. Not from my point of view, but as an Englishwoman. *Mon Dieu!* as an Englishwoman with the fear of Mrs. Grundy if not the fear of God before her eyes!”

She looked at him, and his words, which amazement and uncertainty had made flippant, died before the sadness of her glance.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “Nobody troubles about me. Nobody has ever troubled. I have never been happy all my life. And now when I could have happiness without hurting any one, why must I give it up because of a world in which I have no concern?” She paused a moment, and looked at him uncertainly.

“You think I ought to feel I’m doing wrong? Perhaps I ought. But I *don’t* feel it, René. I should be doing wrong if I married you, because——” She left the sentence

unfinished, forbearing to tell him that he would some day thank her for his freedom.

"Don't argue about it," she said, smiling, though her eyes were full of tears. "It's my last word. If you won't agree, I shall go back to Dymfield to-morrow."

"No. Don't let us waste time now, at any rate," he exclaimed eagerly. "We shall have plenty of time to talk and argue. Just now I'm too absurdly happy!"

He drew her down beside him on the sofa, and covered her eyes with kisses.

"Anne! do you know what a sweet thing you are? No, of course you don't know, and that's what make you so delicious!"

Even while she thrilled from head to foot with an almost unbearable happiness, Anne remembered the price at which it was bought, and told herself that it was not too dear.

"I only know I'm happy," she whispered. "But I'm afraid of waking up and finding it's a dream."

Again and again, through the years as they passed, her own words came back to her.

In the summer evenings at Dymfield, she thought of them. When she travelled, they often came to her as she stood before some picture in church or gallery. She thought of

them sometimes at night, when on some Italian terrace she sat watching the sunset.

To-day she remembered them, as she walked home through the sunshine, and mounted the stately Spanish steps towards her apartment on the heights.

"Twenty years ago!" She repeated the words to herself in wonder.

"It was a beautiful dream, and thank God, I never waked."

XVI

DR. DAKIN was spending the night in town on his way to Paris.

For the previous fortnight, urged not so much by the impressive hints concerning his duty thrown out by Mrs. Carfax, as by a curious change in his wife's letters to him, he had been on thorns of impatience to join her in Paris, and bring her home.

The serious illness of a patient, an exasperating case which always seemed on the point of mending, only to sink into another relapse, kept him prisoner.

Not till the previous day had he considered it safe to telegraph for the doctor he had engaged to look after his practice during his own absence, and a still further delay had been occasioned by the necessity of meeting this man in London to explain the peculiar nature of the case under treatment.

Leaving his hotel in the evening, he walked westward in search of a place to dine, meditating in a troubled fashion as he

walked. His wife had been away more than three months, and he had made no effort to recall her. The visit, accepted ostensibly at least, partly on the ground of her health, was in any case to have been a long one. Then followed the plea of the cure which a certain well-known physician had prescribed, and again her husband had agreed to her wishes. He told himself to be patient. After his talk with Miss Page, he had been full of hope. But it would not do to annoy Madge by bringing her home again before she wished to come. It would be wiser to let her tire of Paris, and then when she returned, he would take the advice of a wise and charming woman, and perhaps there might yet be happiness for Madge,—and for him too.

So he had waited, forcing himself to self-control through his hourly longing for her.

At first, for many weeks, her letters were discouraging;—hurried and indifferent. She was enjoying Paris. She felt better, or not so well. They were the letters of a woman who writes perfunctorily, from a sense of duty. Quite lately they had altered, and though the change in them filled him with delight, it was joy mingled with uneasiness. They were hysterical letters, composed of vague self-reproaches about her selfish neglect of him,

mingled with terms of endearment, and assertions of her own unworthiness.

Fatal letters to write to a man who possessed a trace of cynicism, or of what is commonly called knowledge of the world, but to the simple mind of her husband, they suggested only alarming fears for her bodily health. He must go and fetch her home immediately. Poor little Madge! In the midst of his anxiety, he was not insensible of a thrill of joy at the thought that from whatever cause, her heart had turned to him.

With this thought in his mind, he again dismissed as an impertinence, a letter he had lately read containing more than a hint that his wife's protracted stay in Paris was due to a certain bad influence exercised upon her in the past.

He had never considered the matter seriously, yet as he entered the dining-room a moment later, the whole circumstance of the letter and its accusation, was recalled by the sight of a face he remembered.

He had turned into a restaurant in the Haymarket, to which on their rare visits to town, he had once taken Madge to dine.

With the sentimental idea at which he scarcely smiled, of finding the exact place they had on that occasion occupied, he

went upstairs, and was glad to find the table in the corner disengaged. He had given his order to the waiter, before seated at some little distance across the room, he saw the man he recognized.

For the moment he was puzzled, then like a flash came the memory of a dinner party at Fairholme Court six months ago, and with it in a flood the further memory of other things he had for the moment forgotten.

Monsieur Fontenelle apparently did not see him, but apart from the fact that he had liked him, Dr. Dakin was quite determined to recall their previous meeting to his consciousness.

Madge had sometimes mentioned him in letters. If he had recently come from Paris, he would have news of her. He left his place and crossed to his neighbour's table, with outstretched hand.

"We met at a very pleasant little dinner at Fairholme Court, some months ago," he began. "My name is Dakin. I expect you've forgotten it. Yours is a name one can't forget."

Fontenelle gave him a hasty glance; then took the hand he offered, with a charming smile.

"But of course! When Miss Page was our hostess. Have you heard from her lately? I am told she is coming back."

"Won't you come to my table, as we have neither of us begun to feed?" suggested Dr. Dakin. "It's quieter there. Out of the draught."

"Delighted!" François assured him.

The change was effected.

"I can give you the latest news of your wife," he said almost before he was seated. "I saw her only yesterday. I called in fact to make my farewells."

"How is she?" inquired the doctor anxiously. It was the one question that concerned him.

"Not altogether well, I fancy. A little homesick. Paris possibly a little on her nerves."

He took up the wine list. "Can we agree as to wine?"

The doctor made a hasty gesture. "Anything you like. I'm on my way to bring her home," he observed.

Fontenelle, who was giving the waiter elaborate directions about warming the Burgundy he had selected, did not at once reply.

When the man had hurried off with a *Bien Monsieur!* he looked at his companion.

"You are going to fetch her you say? Good! I think all she wants is the rest and quiet of your charming village. Paris is not

the place for nervous women, doctor. The atmosphere is too exciting—too distracting.” He made a little comprehensive gesture with both hands.

“But you don’t think she’s ill?”

In spite of himself, in spite of his British horror of displaying emotion, the doctor’s voice shook a little.

“*Mais non! Mais non. Rien de tout,*” returned his companion, with a reassuring smile. “Madame is suffering a little from her ‘cure.’ That is only to be expected. Pardon!” he laughed genially. “For the moment I forgot I was not speaking to a layman.”

The doctor laughed also, and tried to forget that the mere mention of his wife’s name had set his heart beating.

He applied himself to his dinner.

“Did I understand that you’re going to leave Paris for long?” he asked. “I think you said you had been to say good-bye to Madge—to my wife?”

“I’m really uncertain,” returned François, regarding him with keen smiling eyes. “I’m over here on business connected with the exhibition to which your countrymen with more politeness than discretion have elected me President. After that?” He shrugged

his shoulders with a characteristic gesture. "I don't know. A journey to Egypt, perhaps. But that depends on circumstances. Did I tell you that Miss Page is coming home? She may even be in Paris by this time. Mrs. Dakin is evidently looking forward to seeing her."

For a moment the doctor was silent.

"Miss Page is an old friend of yours—a great friend?" he asked suddenly.

"I think I may say my best and dearest friend."

At the mention of Anne's name an imperceptible change crept into his manner. An undercurrent of irony, too subtle for his companion's apprehension, vanished from his voice and from his words, which were grave and deliberate.

"I might with truth repeat what you have said," returned the doctor slowly.

He took up his knife and fork, and absently replaced them on his plate, into which he stared, as though lost in thought.

"And so," said François, watching him, "you are naturally indignant about a certain story——"

The other man looked up quickly.

"I know all about it," Fontenelle went on, "Madame Didier, who belongs to a

certain feminine type indigenous to every country, has worked with great industry, and Fortune has favoured her. During her visit to England, she came across a certain Mrs. Crosby, the wife of old Mrs. Burbage's nephew."

He paused, and critically tasted the wine which the waiter had just poured into his glass.

"*Bon !*" he exclaimed appreciatively.

"This woman," he continued, "convinced that her husband's inheritance was stolen from him by our friend, naturally paints her in the glaring colours of an adventuress."

Both men smiled.

"The character suits Anne Page, doesn't it? At any rate it suited Madame Didier, who with unfailing resource has patiently unearthed the story of twenty years ago. This story, I understand, she has lost no time in communicating to the wife of the vicar of your idyllic village, whence having reached the fountain head, I imagine it is flowing in refreshing streams through the entire county?"

"No," returned the doctor quickly. "The vicar, whatever qualities he may lack, happens to be a gentleman, and is moreover one of Miss Page's many friends. Fortunately this

woman, Madame Didier, wrote to him, not to Mrs. Carfax, and as the letter to some extent concerned my wife, he brought it to me."

Fontenelle gently raised his eyebrows, but refrained from comment.

"The vicar," Dr. Dakin went on with a half smile, "is filled with righteous indignation about what he naturally believes an impudent lie. He has written to his correspondent, threatening pains and penakies if she communicates with his wife, or tries in any way to spread the scandal. He's a wise man," he added dryly. "Mrs. Carfax is not the woman to be trusted with the reputation of her dearest friends."

There was a moment's silence.

"I didn't tell him," continued the doctor, "that I had previously heard the story from my wife, who assures me it is true."

François's expression was inscrutable.

"And—pardon me—you, I imagine, regard the matter as, well let us say as an Englishman?"

"If as I suppose I am to understand, you mean that I'm naturally a hypocrite," returned the doctor rather stiffly, "you are mistaken. Miss Page is the best, the most generous woman I have ever met. Whatever her life may have been, that is the result. The rest doesn't concern me."

A sudden light sprang into the other man's eyes.

"I beg your pardon," he said simply, in a tone of sincerity.

He looked round the room which was now hot, crowded, and noisy with the clink of glasses, and the babel of talk.

"Have you anything to do this evening? If not, will you come round to my club where we can smoke in peace?"

"I should like nothing better," returned Dr. Dakin.

XVII

"I'm going to tell you the story of Anne Page as I know it," said Fontenelle, as they sat in a corner of the almost deserted smoking-room. "You may hear all sorts of versions, and I should like you to listen now to the true one."

He smiled, as he lighted a cigarette.

"You also, are a student of psychology, doctor, and it has always seemed to me that Anne Page is a singularly interesting study.

"Nowadays in this age of modern thought, perhaps I should rather say in this age of fads and cranks, through which men and women are groping towards a different conception of life, her conduct would not have been so amazing.

"If she had been a modern woman, filled with the latest ideas of the sanctity of passion, whatever that may mean; the duty of leading her own life, and so forth, one might class her with a number of earnest feminine enthusiasts whose brains, like the old bottles of Scripture,

are unequal to the strain of the new wine of recent ideas."

"She doesn't fit in *there*," returned the doctor, smiling.

"Think of it!" exclaimed François with sudden animation. "A simple gentle woman of twenty years ago. A woman who had led the narrowest of lives; ignorant of men; ignorant of passion—till at the age of thirty-seven she falls in love, and is loved by a man ten years younger than herself. And that man, René Dampierre."

The doctor started. "You mean the painter?"

François nodded. "She was his mistress for three years."

Both men smoked in silence for a few moments.

"One might have guessed," said the doctor quietly, "that she would choose a lover worthy of her."

"Anne is an unconscious artist," returned Fontenelle. "It was the most beautiful love affair I have ever known. The only perfect one—thanks to her courage and self-sacrifice."

"Anne is a simple woman in the sense that all her emotions are unsophisticated, original, generous. But she is also the wisest woman I ever met."

"She knew René better than he knew himself. That is to say, she knew men—or rather divined their natures, by her sixth sense of intuition.

"She might have married him. He wanted to marry her. But she knew what the result would be.

"Oh, René was not a brute," he exclaimed in answer to his companion's sudden movement. "Far from it. Except for his genius, he was the average kindly natured man. But Anne very wisely took his genius into account. He was not the man to marry, and she knew it. She is proud, as only a woman of her type can be proud. And then—here felt the artist in life—this was her first and last passion, the only vital emotion she had ever experienced in an existence otherwise incredibly grey, incredibly monotonous. She wanted to make it a perfect memory for herself, as well as for him."

He paused a moment, throwing back his head against the padded chair, while he watched the rings of smoke he was blowing.

"And so," he went on presently, "she made a resolve which few women would have found the courage either to make, or what is more important—to keep. She determined to stay with him only while his first passion lasted.

She made up her mind to go even before the first cloud was in the sky,—at any rate before it was visible to *him*. Women have keener eyes than men for rising clouds."

The doctor was silent. "Rightly or wrongly," he went on, "she felt that only in this way, only by running no risk of injuring either him or his career, she was justified in taking her little measure of happiness. She knew him very well," he added meditatively. "René was as weak as most of us, weaker than some perhaps, where women are concerned. He would have been unfaithful, but he could never take his unfaithfulness callously. He would have been torn perpetually between his desires, and his dread of hurting her. And his work would have suffered terribly. Anne was right to go."

"You speak as an artist," remarked the doctor drily.

"I can speak in no other way," returned François. "René Dampierre was a great man with a definite work to do."

"But Dampierre, — René Dampierre?" The doctor uttered the name with respect. "He must have died soon afterwards, surely?"

"Eighteen months afterwards. But not, I regret to tell you, of a broken heart."

François placed the end of his cigarette

in the ash-tray before him, and ground it to powder. His smile was a curious blend of sadness and irony.

"It was an accident, wasn't it?"

"Yes. The result of a fall from his horse. He was riding at Chantilly."

"And you mean that——?"

"That Anne was right to go. She knew the woman before René himself guessed the truth. She suffered I know, or perhaps as I *don't* know. But not so horribly, I think, as they would both have suffered if she had stayed. And she made her exit with dignity." He smiled again. "I am a Frenchman, doctor, and I suppose the love of *le beau geste* is in my blood. I take off my hat to Anne Page."

When Dr. Dakin spoke, it was in a voice from which he could not banish indignation.

"It seems incredible! That he could forget a woman like that, I mean."

His own faithful nature rose up in revolt at the outrage to all his sentiments of enduring love.

"He didn't," returned François quickly. "Anne had no real rival. She may rest in peace. Fate was kind to her—and perhaps to him," he added. "Their love while it lasted, was perfect, and death settled the future. You are thinking that if any woman

was worthy of fidelity it was Anne Page? I agree with you. But when a woman late in life falls in love with a genius——” he made a gesture with his hand, and left the sentence unfinished.

“Tragic, doctor, I admit. But it’s life,—and Anne knew and accepted it.”

The faint irony which he could seldom keep out of his voice, was almost submerged by something that sounded like real emotion.

“You knew them both very well, of course?” asked Dr. Dakin, after quite a long silence. “When they were together, I mean.”

“I was with them nearly every evening, when they entertained all the men best worth knowing, in Paris. It must have struck you that Anne is a woman of unusual mental distinction?”

“She is a very brilliant woman.”

“That is easily discernible when, as with you, she has a chance of real conversation. She has naturally a keen quick mind, and she learnt to talk in a very admirable school.

“The evenings at the flat in the Rue de Fleurus are still remembered in Paris.”

He smiled to himself, as though in thought he had gone back to those evenings.

“I wish I could put before you doctor, the charm of their home life. There has been

nothing like it since. That sounds terribly middle-aged, doesn't it? I realize that I'm growing old, when I think of the society of twenty years ago, as incredibly brilliant and fascinating.

"At any rate it was composed of the men and women who have since made their mark on our age. They are well known names, at any rate to a man like you who interests himself in our countrymen as well as in your own.

"Among the painters there were Giroux, and Bussi res, and Deslon. All men associated with the Impressionist movement. Thouret the novelist, and Dacier the poet, were intimate friends. They met Anne first at Fairholme Court, with me, and they were always devoted to her. Then there was Matignon the critic, a fine old man, who adored her. And Bellet, and Courtois—I could go on quoting indefinitely. They had a flat in the Rue de Fleurus, beautiful as only Anne knows how to make a home beautiful. It overlooked the Luxembourg gardens, and was close to my present studio. I remember it always full of sunshine, and I can see Anne arranging the flowers, (every room was full of flowers), and looking up from them to laugh.

"She was so radiantly happy it was a joy to

see her. And she grew so beautiful. She learnt to dress, of course. Beautiful dress is one of her instincts, as you see even now. What a hostess she was! She became the fashion in our set,—René's and mine. The men raved about her. They found *piquante*, that touch of English shyness and modesty which she combines so oddly with dignity. She held a real salon, and a very brilliant one too, in the Rue de Fleurus. Those were her *beaux jours*."

"I can imagine it," said the doctor.

"That sort of *ménage* is only possible in Paris," observed François. "Even there, it's not without its difficulties. But she surmounted them by her very unconsciousness and simplicity. Some of the women even, were won over. One or two of the wives of men in René's circle were her intimate friends. They went to her as we all did, for advice and sympathy."

"Just as we all go now to be consoled," put in Dr. Dakin.

"Precisely. And one of the secrets of her power of drawing confidence, is that Anne is by nature a maternal woman—a mother."

"That's the pity of it."

"I agree. Life hasn't given her everything. But at least it gave her three

unforgettable years, and a memory which has kept her sweet and fresh and young as in her girlhood she could never have been."

"And she went away," said the doctor gently, "in the midst of her happiness?"

"She went away quietly, simply, with no fuss, as she does everything. With no farewell scene, or anything of that sort. She left him a letter, and with me, a message. The hardest I ever had to deliver in my life."

Fontenelle got up, and threw the end of his cigarette into the fire.

"And then she travelled?"

"For years. When they were together, she and Dampierre went to Italy every spring. I believe she has gone over all the old ground since then. She seems to have gone half over Europe as well. I used to get letters from Athens, from Constantinople, from Naples, Rome, Florence. Fortunately she was a rich woman, able to work off her restlessness."

He laughed a little. "That was one of her adorable simplicities. It never occurred to her that the possession of a fortune made any difference to the situation. She only looked upon it as a means of independence and freedom when her happiness should come to an end. And she was right. René never thought of it either. In some ways he was as

childlike and as unworldly a creature as she. He had inherited a fairly good income from his father. He would not have known what to do with more. That's Anne Page's story, doctor. I don't know how it strikes an Englishman, but to me it seems rather a wonderful one because of the type of woman to whom it belongs."

"Yes," returned Dr. Dakin meditatively. "One would have thought that convention, or religious prejudice——"

Fontenelle laughed. "She is untouched by either. *C'est un vrai caractère, cette chère Anne Page!* Until she came to Paris, she hadn't mixed enough with the world even to *know* its conventions. Religion? Well, 'by their fruits ye shall know them,' and if the fruits of the Spirit are faith and hope, and the charity which suffers long and is kind, there never was a woman who has more absolutely attained the results of religion. It's not a satisfactory result for the moralist, I admit," he added.

"But in this very interesting and amazing world, the moralists don't have it all their own way," observed the doctor.

"So far as creeds and dogmas are concerned, Anne is a born pagan. It is not that she has examined and rejected them.

They simply don't appeal to her nature. When as young men we first met her, we called her *Flora*, amongst ourselves. She struck us even then as a curious blend of Madonna and goddess. And the physical appearance has a mental and moral parallel. I remember once when I wanted to tease her, I asked what had become of her religion.

"She looked at me with those childlike eyes of hers and said :

" 'I never had any,—in the sense you mean. By being with René I'm not hurting any one. And it's only by hurting people one does wrong.' "

"Then—I admit it was cruel of me, but I was curious—I said that some people had refrained from doing what she had done, for the sake of example to humanity. Her reply was 'But apart from religion, people haven't yet decided what *is* the right way to arrange their lives.' "

Dr. Dakin smiled. "In view of the modern ferment of opinion, she was right there."

François pushed his chair back, with a movement of impatience.

"Well now what's to be done? The tale of her incredibly evil past will spread I suppose, and Dymfield will become impossible."

He laughed rather savagely.

"It's quite an amusing notion that scandal should attack a gentle woman of Anne's age. Yet I imagine that few of the natives of a village possess a sense of humour."

"I don't think the story will spread. The vicar as I told you is absolutely incredulous, and no one else has heard it."

"Except Madame?" hinted François. "I don't wish to suggest an unkindness. But women, you understand? A whisper to a dear friend—*hein*?"

"My wife is devoted to Miss Page," said the doctor shortly. "I shall warn her; but she will be indignant at the mere suggestion of betrayal."

"*Parfaitement!*" returned François with a bow. "Pardon me. You will probably find Miss Page in Paris," he added. "She was expected to-day."

"So much the better. It will be a great pleasure."

The doctor rose. "Good-night," he said, extending his hand cordially. "And thank you for this talk. Perhaps if you decide not to go to Egypt, you will do us the honour of staying with us a little later, when my wife comes back? Our friendship for Miss Page makes a bond between us," he added, in his pleasant sincere voice.

François met his eyes for an instant. They were full of the kindliness and instinctive liking he felt for the man he was addressing.

"A thousand thanks. But I think I am almost certain to go to Egypt."

"Another time then. I shall only say *au revoir*."

François followed him into the hall, and watched him step into a hansom, and give the address of his hotel to the driver.

When he turned away, there was a curious expression about his lips, which presently deepened into a smile that was partly cynicism, partly something else.

He was reflecting on the curious encounters liable to befall a man like himself. He thought of the evening's conversation, and smiled again to think how completely till this moment he had failed to realize the humour of its friendly nature.

"*C'est un honnête homme. Il ne méritait pas ça——*"

François dismissed the subject of Dr. Dakin's deserts with a mental shrug, as he went upstairs to his room, in which a bright fire was burning.

XVIII

FRANÇOIS drew up an armchair close to the blaze, and lighted his pipe.

His thoughts at first dwelt upon the man with whom he had just parted — a loyal straight, good fellow if ever there was one, he decided. The verdict was accompanied by a greater sense of self-dissatisfaction, a sensation nearer to shame and regret that he had for years experienced.

It was an uncomfortable attitude of mind, and with characteristic love of ease, he hastened to obliterate it, by turning his attention elsewhere.

His conversation with the doctor had conjured up so many mental pictures of the past, that he scarcely knew which of them to examine first.

The salon in Anne Page's flat, rose before him. With the retentive memory of a painter, François recalled minutely every detail of the charming room.

He saw the deep-red curtains drawn across

the three windows, the rose-coloured carpet, the lights shining like stars between the flowers. He saw Anne standing near the table at which coffee was served, receiving her guests with her lovely smile, and eager words of welcome.

He remembered to the smallest detail of lace and trimming, a dress she often wore in the evening, a gown of purple silk which suited so admirably, her hair and the soft whiteness of her neck.

Giroux and Bussières were talking to her, and he watched with amusement their excited faces, and vehement gestures.

It was the evening after René had shown his new pictures.

There had been a crowd of his friends in the studio all the afternoon ; a crowd of eager interested men and women, standing before the canvases now so well known, so greatly prized.

Bussières and Giroux he knew were talking of the latest picture, his masterpiece—the famous picture of the lady in the green dress, leaning back upon the sofa.

François looked round the room already filled with people.

He saw the white head of Matignon the critic, towering above the rest. He saw the dark alert face of Thouret bent towards

Madame Valory, the painter of pastels delicate and fragile as herself. He saw Courtois the sculptor, in animated discussion with Bellet the new poet of audacities in rhythm. He heard René's sudden amused laugh, and turned to look at him, as he moved from one group to the other, a little flushed and excited, his fair hair ruffled, his slim yet athletic figure suggesting the Englishman of sport and open-air pastimes, rather than the brilliant French painter he had even then become.

Conspicuous among the crowd was the lady whose portrait he had recently painted.

Blanche Aubriot was the wife of an elderly *roué*, who regarded her very pronounced flirtations with an indifference equal to that which she on her side extended towards his infidelities.

She was a beautiful young woman of two or three and twenty, childless, soulless, and much admired.

To-night she wore the green dress of the picture, and held her court with her usual piquante vivacity.

François regarding the scene with critical and observant eyes, noticed how frequently her glance wandered in René's direction, and with amusement, her oft-repeated efforts to attract his attention.

His own eyes turned again to Anne, where she stood surrounded by friends, laughing and talking.

He watched her to-night with peculiar admiration.

Curiously enough Dampierre had never painted her.

Once soon after they had settled in their apartment, François had spoken of it as a foregone conclusion.

"She's just your type—the essentially feminine type of woman."

Greatly to his surprise, René shook his head.

"*C'est impossible*," he said conclusively.

François wondered, but the conversation turned immediately upon other matters, and it was only just before he took leave, when Anne was out of the room, that his friend took a book from one of the shelves, and turning over the leaves, handed it to him at an open page.

"That's why I can't paint her," he said.

The poem he touched with his forefinger was Browning's song beginning—

*"Nay, but you who do not love her,
Is she not pure gold, my mistress?"*

François read it aloud, and came to the last few lines—

*"Then why not witness, calmly gazing,
If earth holds aught—speak truth—above her?
Above this tress, and this, I touch
But cannot praise, I love so much!"*

"For *praise*, read *paint*," said René, taking the book and closing it. "It's the same thing. You're the man to paint her. Ask her to sit for you."

François had always delayed to avail himself of the suggestion.

To-night he determined to delay no longer. Crossing the room, he joined the little group round Anne, and presently drew her away.

"I haven't had a word with you this evening," he said. "And now you must give me one, or even two. About that portrait. I think the time has come. When will you sit for me?"

Even at the moment, he was struck by the curious expression which crossed her face.

When afterwards he tried to analyze it, he could only think of the face of a woman who expecting a signal of some sort, had heard, and accepted it.

"When would you like me to come?" she asked.

She was standing at the end of the room by the fire, and as she raised her eyes, François saw in them the look which did not escape him when he came to paint them.

They discussed the matter for a few moments. Various engagements on both sides postponed the first sitting for a fortnight, but a day was finally arranged.

"How long will it take?" asked Anne.

He made a gesture of ignorance. "I don't know. A month perhaps, with luck. But this is going to be my masterpiece, Anne. I shall succeed, or perish in the attempt. Have you got that flowered gown you used to wear in the garden at Dymfield? I suppose not. Yes? *Très bien!* Bring it, I want to try an effect."

He was interrupted by René, who came up at the moment, and laid his hand lightly on Anne's arm.

"I want you to go and talk to Matignon, dear," he said in a low voice. "He's always bad tempered if you don't pay him enough attention. Go and make love to the old boy."

A vague uneasiness passed from François's mind at the sound of his friend's voice, always gentle when he spoke to Anne. It was even gentler than usual now, and he did not fail to notice the caress of his hand on her sleeve, nor the look of happy understanding between them, as she moved away, smiling, to obey him.

"I'm arranging for her to come and pose. I'm going to begin the picture at once," he said.

"*Bon !*" returned René, his face lighting up. "You've taken your time about it."

"One hesitates to begin one's masterpiece," François retorted. "You who do nothing else, except finish them, ought to have compassion on the weaker brethren."

René made a laughing gesture of menace.

"*Allons, mes amis . . . mais calmez-vous donc !*" exclaimed Blanche Aubriot at his elbow.

François looked down at her white shoulders, and experienced a momentary feeling of repugnance which passed into self-ridicule, for glancing at her indolent brown eyes soft as velvet, at her full red lips, at her glossy hair, he acknowledged her beauty.

"Come and talk to me, Monsieur René," she urged with the insistence of a spoilt child. "You're a great man, I know, but the lion condescends to the mouse sometimes, doesn't he ?"

François followed them with his eyes as they moved away together.

"If she had said *cat*, I should have found no difficulty in reversing the parts," was his inward reflection.

The fire had died down, but as he sat before the smouldering ashes, François was

very far in space and time from the club bedroom in which he was dreaming.

He was passing through successive stages of satisfaction and despair, hope and baffling discouragement, while he painted Anne's portrait. After the first fortnight, she came every day, and every day she was more silent.

He remembered this afterwards. At the time, engrossed heart and soul in his picture, he did not notice her quietude. He was only half consciously perplexed by a subtle difference in her expression which he found hard to reconcile with his previous impression of her—a difference which was at once his inspiration, and his despair.

"If only I can get that, I shall paint a great picture!" he exclaimed one day involuntarily, breaking a long silence.

"What?" asked Anne.

He started, forgetting that he had spoken aloud.

"I don't know."

She smiled a little. "Then I'm afraid you won't get it."

"But I *have*!"

He almost shouted the words, one afternoon a week afterwards, when she had stood patiently almost as long as the daylight lasted.

She looked at him with inquiring eyes, as he threw down his brush.

"I won't touch it again! It's there! It's all right. *Mon Dieu!* Anne, do you hear me? I've painted a great picture."

He came towards the stand, both hands outstretched, and helped her down.

"Come and look before the light goes," he urged. "Why Anne——" his triumphant tone changed abruptly to consternation. "You're not ill, dear? You're trembling so. What a brute I am! I've kept you posing too long. I forgot. Come and sit in this chair. Here's a cushion. I'll get you some water."

She shook her head. "I'm all right," she assured him, trying to smile. "I want to see the picture."

He turned the easel towards her, and she looked at it a long time in silence.

"Do you like it?" asked François at last anxiously.

"It's too good for me. It's idealized," she said. "But it's the best thing you've ever done, François. I congratulate you. You're right. It's your masterpiece."

He felt a warm glow of pleasure. Anne as he had often acknowledged was an admirable critic, instinctively a connoisseur, and her life

amongst painters had trained and sharpened her natural perception. Secretly François stood in greater awe of Anne's verdict on his work, than on that of many of his fellow-craftsmen.

"You have suggested all the Dymfield garden in those flowers," she said after another silence.

"In you," he returned quickly, wondering at the tone in her voice.

"I'm going to give you this, Anne," he went on, speaking gaily to avert an uneasy fear. "I hope you appreciate the compliment. I lay my masterpiece at your feet, and you can pick it up and hang it in your salon, between the two long windows. That's the place for it."

She turned slowly from the picture, and her eyes met his, while she shook her head.

"No," said she in a low voice. "I can't take it, François."

"Why not?"

She leant back in her chair, and a smile so sad that involuntarily he turned away, came creeping round her lips.

"Because I'm a woman," she replied.

He made no reply. The meaning of her words did not escape him, but in a moment she translated them.

"You've painted me at the end of my

beaux jours," she said. "Before they are quite over—but at the end. I'm very grateful. But I couldn't live with that picture, it would be too——"

She did not finish the sentence.

"Besides,—there's another reason," she added after a further pause.

"What's this?" asked François, suddenly taking a book from the table. With a sort of blind haste, he strove to hinder her next words by snatching at any pretext to arrest them.

"It's a book you lent me, nearly three years ago, I'm ashamed to say. When I first came to Paris. I've always forgotten to return it. But to-day," she paused as though her mind were wandering away from the present. "To-day I remembered it."

François took it up.

"*Mademoiselle de Maupin*. I forgot I'd ever lent it to you."

"You remember the story?"

He nodded. "Of course."

"It's very different from my story, isn't it? But the way she found, I had already discovered for myself before I read the book. It's the right way. In my case, the only way."

François had just lighted a cigarette. He threw it away with a sudden jerk, and looked at her without speaking.

"I'm going to-morrow."

Her voice was steady, but quite colourless.

"René," stammered her friend, "René is going to-morrow?"

"Yes. Into the country for a few days, for the background of his new picture."

François drew up a chair, and sat down close to her.

"Anne," he began gently, "There hasn't been anything? Any . . . ?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. But it's coming. This has been in my mind for weeks. It was there though I scarcely knew it, before you wanted me to sit to you. When you asked me, I knew certainly."

The spring twilight lingered in the studio, and he could still see her face, white against the cushion he had put into the chair.

As he listened to her quiet low voice, all she was saying seemed to him like the illusion of a dream.

Anne to be talking of leaving René! It was an absurd hallucination on his part—a trick of his imagination.

"But René?" he asked nevertheless. "He doesn't know? Why, I saw him early this morning, and he spoke of you——"

For the first time, her voice trembled, and

he watched her slim hands travelling aimlessly over the frills on her dress.

"He doesn't know," she said. "That's why I'm telling you." There was a long silence, and he saw her fighting for composure.

"François," she began at last in a whisper. "He won't understand at first. He'll think me cruel, and wicked and inexplicable." She caught her breath, but went on bravely. "You are far sighted too. You know as well as I do, the woman who will—who will——"

"He doesn't know it yet himself. He still loves me. Now, to-day. And that's why I'm going. I couldn't bear. . . . He must be quite free. It was only on those terms I agreed with myself to—to——" She was shivering now from head to foot, and the words came in gasps like the words of a dying woman. "It has lasted for three years, and I thought it might only be three months. I have had quite . . . quite a long life, François."

He turned away so that he should not see her smile.

"I'm not going to be coward enough to spoil it—for both of us," she went on after minutes which seemed like hours. François had been mechanically counting the strokes of of the clock which ticked maddeningly in the gloom. He had never noticed it before, and

was seized with a sudden mad desire to smash it into fragments.

"But I want you,—will you, François?—in a little while, when he will listen, to say what you can for me?"

He got up, and began to walk about the room, stumbling against the chairs in the way.

At last he turned abruptly, and stood before her.

"Must you, Anne?" His voice was an entreaty. It shook almost as much as her own.

She got up slowly, and gave him both hands.

"Good-bye, François."

He held them close, without speaking.

"I shall write to you," she said, "—later on. I'm going to be a great traveller. You will hear of me from—from all sorts of wonderful places. And I shall see you again, my dear friend. But I don't think I shall ever see——" she stopped, and he felt her hands shaking in his.

"Anne!" he implored. "Don't go."

"Don't say anything more," she implored.

"I have to get through the evening. It's our—last. So you see it must be quite—It must be quite a happy——"

She stretched out a trembling hand for her

cloak, and he wrapped it round her, fastening it for her as though she were a child. Then he took her downstairs, and called a closed *fiacre*.

In the darkness of the courtyard, by the door, he put his arm round her shoulders, and taking both her hands in one of his, he kissed them.

They were wet with the tears she had tried to brush aside.

XIX

Two or three mornings before the conversation between Dr. Dakin and François Fontenelle, Anne, the peaceful Anne of to-day, received by the same post, three letters which interested her.

She knew the handwriting on the envelopes of each, and hastened first to learn what her brother had to say. Hugh, as she had known for some months, was returning to England.

His farm had prospered, and anxious to launch his sons, boys of sixteen and eighteen, in the professions they had chosen, he had determined to retire, and end his days in the old country.

The letter, an affectionate one, stated that he was already in London where he had taken a furnished house, to give him and his wife time to look round, and decide upon their future home.

Anne must come to see them the moment she returned. They were all looking forward to her visit.

She put down the closely written pages with an air of content, and turned smiling to the envelope inscribed in the large childish characters which recalled Sylvia Carfax.

"MY DEAREST DEAR MISS PAGE,

"I *must* write to you because I'm so happy and excited. I've got *splendid* plans. Just yet, I can't tell even *you* what they are, because it's a secret for the present. But it means a simply magnificent chance for me, and of course it has something to do with my work. Mother and father will be very angry, I'm afraid, but I can't help it. It's too good to lose, and one can't sacrifice the whole of one's future because of one's parents. Besides later on, they will see how wise I've been. Oh dear Miss Page, *when* are you coming back? I want to see you so much, because by that time everything will be settled, and I can tell you all about it. I'm too excited to write any more. Only I want you very badly. Do, *do* come home soon.

"Your ever loving

"SYLVIA."

Anne returned the note to its envelope with a slightly worried look.

What folly was the child considering?

She must write to her at once, and insist upon a full explanation.

In the meantime she opened the other letter, which bore the Paris stamp-mark, and was evidently from Madge Dakin. It was very short, and very incoherent, but when Anne raised her head and let the lilac-tinted paper slip from her hand, her face was rather white.

She was at breakfast in her sitting-room, whose window overlooked Rome.

The sunshine flooded the room, and the anemones, purple, white and scarlet, in a bowl placed on the snowy cloth, glowed with the colour of jewels.

The air was sweet with the scent of violets which almost covered a small table near the open window, and outside, over-arching the city, the Roman sky was gloriously, passionately blue.

Anne sat with her elbows on the table, her chin resting on her open palms, lost in thought.

Suddenly she rose, and rang the bell.

"Burks," she said when the maid appeared, "can you pack, and be ready to start for Paris to-day?"

Burks stared. "But I thought we weren't leaving for another month, ma'am," she gasped.

"I know. But I find it's necessary to go at once. Can you manage it?"

The maid beamed with satisfaction. "It'll be a rush, but I'll do it, ma'am, and be thankful. I'm about tired of foreigners," she added, alluding thus with a sniff of scorn to the Italian cook with whom she lived on terms of ill-concealed warfare.

Anne smiled absently.

"Yes. You'll be glad to get home, I dare say Burks, and Paris is on the way. Please give me my writing things. I must put off all my engagements, and write a hundred letters, so I don't want to be disturbed this morning."

Left alone, Anne re-read the letter which had prompted her decision to leave Rome at once. Short, hurried as it was, it conveyed the misery of the writer better than pages of outpouring, and Anne did not need the supplication contained in the last lines to lead her to any creature in distress.

"Poor little soul! Poor wretched little thing!" she thought, before she forced herself to attend to the lengthy correspondence which in view of her large circle of Roman friends, such a hurried leave-taking entailed.

Unwilling to hinder Burks in her work of packing, she went herself to post her letters, and to dispatch the telegram which warned

Madge Dakin of her arrival in Paris next day.

While she walked to the post-office, while she mingled with the crowds in the street, and vaguely heard the cries of the flower vendors, the cracking of whips, the babel of tongues, her thoughts were far away. Her friend's letter had told her nothing definite, but Anne guessed the nature of her trouble.

Imperceptibly, from sadness and perplexity her expression became stern. A passionate anger such as for years she had not experienced, grew momentarily stronger.

"Always the same," she repeated to herself. "Cruel, cynical. Too light-minded to desire anything strongly. Selfish enough to gratify every passing whim——" And then her thoughts received a sudden disconcerting check.

What of the years of loyal friendship he had given her? How could she forget his tenderness and sympathy at the bitterest moment of her life? How ignore either, the many kindnesses difficult for a man wholly cynical, impossible for one wholly selfish, which he had shown to the down-trodden, the beaten, the unsuccessful in life's struggle?

Once again, for the thousandth time she recognized the complexity of every human

being. The baffling contradictions ; good interwoven with evil, nobility with meanness, honour with disloyalty. It was the great intricate puzzle of human nature she was once more considering ; a tangle which nothing but the cloak of infinite charity can cover. The only cloak which glorifies and reveals what is good and strong, while in pity, in despairing tenderness it hides under its ample folds, the shame, the weakness, the ugly scars of the form it both shelters, and defines.

Anne sighed as she reached the top of the Spanish steps, and leant on the wall to take a last look at the city she loved.

Overhead, that "great inverted bowl we call the sky," here, deeply blue, surpassingly beautiful. Beneath it, the dancing sunshine playing alike on dome and pinnacle, roof and tree, and on the thousands of men and women in the busy streets. Men and women hiding within their breasts incalculable heights and depths of virtue and vice, actual or potential. Men and women soon to be covered by the earth on which they walked, to make place for another, yet essentially the same swarm of human beings between the same earth and sky, still asking the same questions under the same sunshine, which laughed, and never replied.

It was the eternal puzzle, the old riddle

to which through the ages no solution has been found.

Anne sighed once more, and then smiled at the futility of considering it again just now, when there was packing to be done.

He maketh His sun to shine upon the just and upon the unjust.

The words slipped into her mind before she turned away, with a momentary sensation of reassurance. At least the sunshine fell upon every one alike. Perhaps it symbolized a cloak of charity wider and larger than any woven by human minds.

“Will Madame come upstairs?”

The maid re-entered the room in which Anne had been waiting, and then preceded her up the staircase to a door which she threw open.

A little figure huddled over the fire, rose hastily as she entered, and with incoherent words that sounded like a cry, threw herself into her arms.

“Oh! You are good! You are good!” Madge repeated, hiding her eyes like a child against the elder woman’s arm. “I should have *died* if you hadn’t come.”

When at last she drew herself away, and looked at her visitor, Anne had to suppress a start of dismay.

She scarcely recognized Madge Dakin.

Her cheeks were white and sunken, and swollen with much crying. She was pitifully thin, and her nervous hands strayed constantly about her face. Her pretty hair, generally so carefully waved and tended, was screwed into an untidy knot at the back of her head. She had evidently not troubled to dress all day, for she wore a bedroom wrapper, whose pink ribbons she had forgotten to tie and arrange.

"My dear child," declared Anne, "you must give me some tea. I'm dying for it, and I shall be speechless till I get it."

"Oh! I'm so sorry. I make it myself generally. I—forgot it this afternoon."

Anne sat down in an armchair near the fire, and purposely allowed her to put on the kettle, and make all the preparations alone.

A glance at the room, a fairly large one, from which a bedroom opened, showed that her friend had probably done nothing but cry over the fire for several days.

It was dusty, and littered with papers, books, working materials. It looked untidy, and uncared for.

There were dead flowers in the vases, and the curtains half drawn, obscured the already dying light of a dull day.

When the kettle began to boil, she rose, and gently pushed Madge into a chair.

She made the tea herself, while in a sort of stupor of wretchedness, Mrs. Dakin watched the movements of her white fingers.

"Now drink that, my child," she said, putting the cup and saucer into her hand.

"Have you had any lunch?"

Madge shook her head.

"Then you must eat a plateful of these excellent biscuits, and you must begin at once."

She proceeded to drink her own tea, talking about her journey, and the slowness of the trains, till watching the face opposite to her she saw a trace of colour in the cheeks.

"And now what is it, my dear?" she asked very gently, as Mrs. Dakin pushed the cup away from her.

For answer, Madge burst into a flood of hopeless tears.

Anne leant forward and took her hand. "It's François Fontenelle, isn't it?" she inquired.

Mrs. Dakin raised her head, her lips parted like a baby's.

"How did you guess?" she whispered.

"Because I've known him for a great many years—very well."

There was the faintest trace of bitterness

in Anne's tone. The sight of the miserable bowed figure had revived some of her resentment.

With a quick movement, Madge left her chair, and knelt beside her, hiding her face, with a childish gesture, while Anne's arm went round her as tenderly as a mother's.

"I'm going to tell you everything," she began in a half-choked voice. "I've been so wicked, Miss Page, that I—I can't believe it. Every now and then I think it's a dream." She shivered in Anne's grasp, and sobbed a moment.

"It was my fault. I thought I was so bored. I thought I was tired of Harry—of Harry who was always been a thousand times too good for me. And so I—I flirted with with him. Helen Didier says I threw myself at his head. She's a hateful woman, and I loathe her, but that's true, I did. He never cared for me. In my heart I knew he didn't, even when I led him on to make love to me. It was nothing but my wretched wicked vanity. Just because I was bored. Just because——" Her voice sank, and for a moment Anne heard nothing but the painful catching of her breath in exhausted sobs.

"And the awful part was," she stammered at last, "that I didn't care either. I never meant

it to be more than a flirtation. At least I think I didn't," she added with a pitiful attempt at perfect honesty. "But——" She stopped short.

"But it became more than that. He was your lover?"

She nodded her head, and then suddenly clasped Anne with convulsive strength.

"And Harry's coming to-morrow. And I'm a vile woman!"

She cried the words aloud in a panic of horror.

"Oh, Miss Page, what shall I do. What will become of me? what shall I say to Harry? I shall go mad!"

Anne laid her cheek on the head that rested against her shoulder, and was silent.

She understood what was passing in the soul of the weak, terror-struck little woman. The horror of outraged conventions, the nightmare conviction that she, the descendant of generations of respectable, honest women, she who had never heard of the sin she had committed, except in accents of disdain or horror, had become an abandoned creature, unfit for decent society, branded, defiled, eternally lost.

Anne's heart went out to her in passionate pity.

"Oh help me! Tell me what to do," Madge wailed. "You're the only woman in the world I dared to tell, because——"

The abrupt pause, and a nervous gesture betrayed her, and Anne started a little, overcome by a sudden conviction.

"Yes. Why did you tell me, my dear?" she asked quietly.

"Because," began Madge hurriedly, "you are so kind, so sweet, I felt——"

"That wasn't the only reason."

"No!" she cried with sudden recklessness. "It wasn't. It's because I heard that you—that you—Helen Didier found it out. She never rested. And then I asked—*him*, and he said I was never to mention your name to her. But she found out all about it, on the pretence that it was *you* who had corrupted my mind, and made me what she calls fast. And so——"

"And so you thought you might confess to a fellow sinner?"

Anne's cheek still rested on Madge's hair, and over her head, her eyes smiled very quietly into the fire.

Madge was silent.

"I knew you wouldn't utterly despise me," she murmured at last, in a low voice.

"He has gone?" asked Anne after a moment. "You sent him away?"

"He came on Monday—two or three days ago. I've forgotten when." She made a distracted gesture. "Until—until just lately, it was all right. We were not—not——"

"Not lovers," said Anne, finishing the sentence for her in an even voice.

"Well, he came. And by that time I'd come to my senses, and to all this awful misery. He's very kind," she went on with a sort of surprise, as a child might speak of the unexpected clemency of some grown-up person. "He said he didn't want to make me unhappy, and if I pleased it should all be at an end, and he would go away. So he went. But Harry's coming to-morrow, and I daren't meet him. I daren't look at him. It's awful—*awful*! I would kill myself,—but I daren't do that either."

She rose from her knees, and sank back in her chair, exhausted and shaking; her eyes fixed on Anne were the eyes of a little hunted animal.

All the terror of the gulf she had put between herself and respectable women, all the horror of feeling herself *déclassée* outside the pale of moral virtue, filled her conventional little soul. It outweighed the sense of her personal disloyalty; it was greater than her sense of wanton treachery towards her husband.

She was no longer a respectable woman, and in that fact lay the sting.

Anne leant towards her. "You haven't told Harry?"

She shook her head.

"Then don't."

Madge stared at her incredulously. "But—but look at me!" she stammered. "He'll see. He'd guess, even if I don't tell him. I can't stop crying. I can't—help it."

While she spoke the tears were running down her cheeks.

"Yes, you can. You can pull yourself together. He expects to find you ill, but you can meet him with a bright face—for his sake."

"For his sake?" repeated Madge.

"Yes. Think of him a little, my dear, and forget yourself."

"You mean he would never forgive me? Never take me back?"

"On the contrary, I know he would. He loves you. You would never hear a word of reproach from his lips. Your husband is a fine man, Madge, and a generous one—and a gentleman."

"Yes, he is! He is!" she returned eagerly. "He *would* forgive me, and I ought to tell him. I should never have a happy moment if I didn't. My life would be spoilt."

"And what about his?" asked Anne quietly.

Madge gazed at her. "You mean he—he wouldn't forget it?"

Anne answered with a curious smile.

"You don't understand much about men, my little Madge," she said. "When they love, their instinct of possession is stronger than anything you can guess. It's bound up with a thousand forces from primitive barbarous times. It may be unreasonable and savage, but it's there. A generous man forgives, and even tries to understand. But the wound remains, and it rankles in spite of him. Have you the right to inflict such a wound? The wrong is yours. *You* should be the only one to suffer."

"But I *shall* suffer," broke in Madge. "And much more, if I feel I'm deceiving him."

"Then accept the extra suffering, and bear it alone," returned Anne quickly. "One pays for everything, Madge. Is it fair to call upon some one else to share the expenses?"

There was silence for a moment.

"If *you* had married—afterwards, I mean," said Madge hesitatingly, "wouldn't you have told your husband?"

"There was no question of my marriage," answered Anne rather painfully. "But if your

circumstances were mine," she added after a moment, "I should act as I advise you to act."

Madge's grasp on her hand tightened, but she did not speak.

"Go back and be a good wife to him," Anne went on. "My dear," she said sadly, "you don't know your blessings. You have married a man with a faithful steadfast nature. His love will never fail you, and in that, thousands of women might envy you. All the material for happiness is within your reach. Happiness for the lack of which many women starve all their days. It never comes to them. It's never offered. And if they can't bear to be utterly without the joy of love, before the earth covers them, they have to take it at a great price."

Her smile brought the tears again to Madge's eyes.

"Such a price, my dear little Madge, as I'm glad you know nothing about."

"Dear Miss Page!" she whispered. A moment's half-awed revelation came to her of all that her friend's words implied. In the light of it, her own fears and regrets, her whole mental attitude towards the past, later as well as immediate, seemed incredibly petty, mean, and trivial. She was ashamed with a nobler less selfish shame than she had ever experienced.

Her cheeks burnt, and her tears ceased to flow.

"Oh! I've been a beast!" she cried involuntarily. "I've always been so selfish and hateful to Harry. I've taken everything as my right. I've never thought of any one but myself. I've never thought of the lives of other women. You are right. It would only be one more selfishness to tell him. I won't. I'll love him instead."

"Do that, my dear, and you'll make him the happiest of men," returned Anne simply. "And don't refuse him children, Madge," she added softly. "You owe him that. Besides, you're refusing the greatest happiness for yourself. The blessing that women—women like me, can never have. That's part of the price, you see. Not the least part of the price," she added as though to herself.

She rose, and Madge stood up too, still holding her hand.

The firelight fell on Anne's face, and the younger woman looked at her as though she had never seen her before,—with a tender surprised admiration.

"You are so beautiful!" she exclaimed suddenly.

The first smile Anne had seen came to her lips.

"I shall pray that my first baby may have eyes just like yours," she said, almost gaily. "And hair like your lovely hair—when she's a little older."

Anne laughed. "It used to be brown. It went white very quickly—in three months."

As she glanced into the mirror above the fireplace, she thought suddenly of François's portrait with its mass of soft fair hair, *couleur de miel*; *couleur de poussière dorée*. She remembered the epithets of the painters.

"I must go now," she said. "To-morrow Harry will be here to take care of you. Make yourself look pretty, Madge. Put on your nicest frock, and do your hair the way he likes, high up, you know, with little fluffy curls about. And make the room pretty, dear. I'll order some flowers to be sent round to-night. Lots of them, so you'll have plenty to do to arrange them. No more sitting by the fire and crying, mind! No looking back. Only look forward."

Madge held her tight. "Oh! you've given me so much courage!" she exclaimed with a long sigh of relief. "You dearest of women. I'll do everything you tell me."

XX

OUTSIDE, in the lighted street, Anne called a cab, and gave the address of the nearest florist.

Her thoughts dwelt upon Madge, as the carriage rattled down the boulevard.

"I'm scarcely sorry," was the outcome of her grave reflection. "It will make a woman of her. She needed a great shock, or a great sorrow to take her out of herself, and make her realize what it would mean to lose her husband."

It was only while she was choosing flowers for her, that the part of Madge's confession which concerned herself, came back confusedly to her mind. It gathered greater clearness as she drove towards her hotel, and by the time she reached it, and was sitting by her bedroom fire after dinner, she found herself wondering what would be the outcome of the matter.

That she might be sure of Madge Dakin, her instinct satisfied her. Yet the results of Madame Didier's inquiries would in all

probability, from other sources, reach Dymfield. What then ?

Anne's thoughts flitted from Mrs. Carfax to Mrs. Willcox, the solicitor's wife, a lady who was interested in Church Missions, and Rescue Homes for Fallen Women. The memory of Miss Goldie, a maiden lady of substantial means, and views of life which even Dymfield considered rigid, came to her, and forced a smile. She saw her sitting in the front pew in church, her black bonnet with two purple pansies upon it, tied tightly under her chin. She saw her angular elbows, under the short mantle of black silk adorned with bugle trimming. She heard her rasping voice, which seldom softened even for Anne, who as a rule affected insensibly the voices of her neighbours.

She remembered Mr. Willcox, stiff, erect, lean-faced Mr. Willcox, loud in his denunciation of the present age, which he considered lax and immoral to the last degree.

She thought of the Vicar, with his blustering attempts at modernity, and his violently expressed scorn of everything but muscular Christianity and common sense.

Dymfield was the typical English village, with its types indigenous to the soil, firmly rooted, impervious to criticism, profoundly self-satisfied.

Dymfield for Anne would be impossible.

But Dymfield meant Fairholme Court, to which her heart was inextricably linked. The garden that she had planted, the garden that was full of fragrant memories of the blossoming time of her life. The bare idea of leaving it sent a pang of desolation to her heart.

She got up and began to walk restlessly about the room.

The absurdity of such an outcome of malicious gossip, struck her with a pathetic desire to laugh.

"After all these years! At my age," she murmured.

She thought of her three years of happiness, the little space of time which had opened like a flower in her grey life, and wondered pitifully why any one should grudge it to her. But most of all, she shrank from the thought that people should talk about it. It had been for so many years her secret possession, the memory that had sweetened all her later days.

It would be insupportable to know that her acquaintances were gossiping about her. About her and René.

A painful flush rose to her face as she sat down again by the fire.

After her talk with Madge Dakin, her old life seemed too near. She thought of the

parting with René in the morning—the morning he left her for his three days' work at Fontainebleau.

The agony of making that parting a light one! She remembered that he turned at the door, and came back to kiss her again. The sun was on his hair, as he crossed the room.

Involuntarily to-night, twenty years after the words were spoken, Anne put her hands over her ears, that she might not hear his voice. But she knew what he had said. She remembered how, when he was gone, her resolution wavered.

Without question he loved her still. Wasn't it too soon? Might she not stay a little longer? Just a little while longer? And then the *bonne* had brought the letters of the second post, and among them there was one for René in a handwriting she knew. Within the past month they had been coming very often, these letters. Lately, every day.

She remembered how the sunshine had streamed upon the envelope at which she sat staring, till at last she moved to make her preparations.

Then the long train journey, and the agony which feared to betray itself in some insane fashion which might cause her to be stopped

—forcibly prevented from reaching her destination.

She wanted to shriek aloud, to rave and cry, like the madwoman she half feared she might in fact have become.

Of the next few weeks she recalled nothing but a confused nightmare impression of unfamiliar rooms, strange faces, strange voices. Of people who for some mad reason were going about as usual, occupied with the ordinary business of life; talking, laughing, eating and drinking, unmoved, unconcerned.

One book on every hotel table drew her like a magnet. She would sit down anywhere with a *Bradshaw* before her, and at once, mechanically plan her journey back to Paris.

Over and over again, she looked out trains, studied connections, pictured the moment of her arrival.

It would be tea-time. The lamps just lit. René sitting by the fire—René leaping to his feet to meet her.

Or it would be early morning. She would open his bedroom door softly . . .

And then the realization of her madness; more sleepless nights, fresh strange hotels, new cities up and down whose streets she wandered wondering why she should be there, why she should enter one building rather than another,

why the day never passed, and when the night came, thinking would God that it were morning.

So terribly near seemed her past torture, that with all her strength Anne tried to stem the flood of reminiscence.

Thank God, little Madge Dakin had never known, would never know, misery such as hers! In the midst of her whirl of memories Anne gratefully considered this.

With an effort at diversion, she tried to recall the names of the cities in which she stayed, through which she had passed during the first few months of her exile.

In vain. She had only a confused impression of scorching streets, of palm trees against a hot blue sky; of seas hatefully, mockingly calm and blue.

She was in Athens when the news of his death reached her, and with it a packet of letters written during the first few weeks after her departure. They were letters from René, never sent, because she had left no address. Letters written in the frenzied hope that some day soon he must hear from her.

It was then that she tasted her first moment of peace.

She remembered sitting in a little walled garden somewhere within the city, and for the

first time seeing that the blue sky overhead was beautiful.

She noticed the broad leaves of a fig-tree clambering upon the wall opposite, and listened to the dripping of a little stream which flowed from a stone trough into a well whose mouth was fringed delicately with ferns and wild flowers. And for the first time came to her a premonition of the calm and peace, and even happiness of her later years.

Her emotional life was over. No man as a lover would ever exist for her again. But she had experienced the love for which she had been willing to pay. She had paid, and some day she would be content.

René dead, had become hers once more—this time for ever.

Later in the year she met François at Antibes, and heard calmly, with scarcely a stab of pain, what she was prepared to hear. She had been right to go. But René had died before he ceased to love her.

Afterwards, her true wander years began. And then at last, the thought of the house and the garden at Dymfield became dear to her, and she went to them as a child goes home.

Anne let her mind dwell gratefully upon the quiet happy years she had spent at Dymfield.

She thought of her work among her flowers, and the paradise of beauty it had produced. She thought of the poorer village people whose lives she knew, whose children she loved, to whom for years she had been a friend. She remembered her little plans for their welfare, all the pleasant trifles which made up the sum of her daily existence.

And as she mused, came a wondering recognition of the healing of time, the passing of all violent emotion, whether of joy or of despair.

From some recess of her memory there sprang the words of an Eastern sage, who as a motto true alike in times of sorrow and times of delight, told his disciple to grave upon his signet ring, one sentence—*This too will pass.*

XXI

ANNE started for London next morning, intending to spend the night in town, and devote the next day to her brother, and to Sylvia Carfax, to whom she had not found time to write.

Early on Thursday morning she drove to Carlisle House.

The page boy who took her up in the lift, indicated a door at the end of the corridor, and left her.

Anne knocked, and in response to a voice within, entered Sylvia's bedroom.

It was littered with cardboard boxes, open trunks, dresses, hats, raiment of all sorts, and stumbling over the obstacles in her way, Sylvia rushed towards her with a cry of joy.

Even before she kissed her, Anne had time to notice the worried look on the girl's face, which robbed it of its youthful prettiness.

"Oh!" she gasped. "I was afraid you wouldn't come in time, and I didn't know *what* to do, or how to get out of it. Oh! I'm so thankful to see you, Miss Page. Sit down.

Do sit down—if you can find a place,” she added, trying to laugh.

Anne chose the bed as the only available spot.

“My dear child, what’s the matter?” she exclaimed. “You’re packing, I suppose. Where are you going?”

“To—America,” returned Sylvia, with a gulp.

Anne looked at her, and drew her down beside her on the bed.

“Tell me all about it from the very beginning,” she said, with quiet insistence.

“*Don’t* be angry with me,” implored Sylvia, her lips trembling. “I thought I’d been so clever to arrange it all myself, without saying a word about it. But—but now I’m frightened. And my contract’s signed, and I daren’t——”

“But what’s it all about? Tell me clearly, Sylvia.

Sylvia made an effort to obey, and though lucidity was not the strong part of her story, by the end of half an hour’s questioning and explanation, Anne gathered that the girl had fallen into the hands of the manager of a third-rate theatrical company. The man had tempted her with the offer of a “star” part in a musical comedy, and she had signed a contract with him for America.

"He said he would make my fortune," she declared. "He praised my voice so much, and told me I was wonderful, and that I should make a great hit. But he made me promise not to tell any one I was going. He said he wanted to have the credit of discovering me, and all that sort of thing. I knew mother and father would be horrified, but I thought it was too good a chance to lose, and that I'd risk their anger. Because, if I turned out a success, and made a lot of money, they would be very proud," she added.

The instinctive knowledge of human nature shared by the pillars of the Church, caused Anne despite her anxiety, a secret smile.

"I thought he was so kind," Sylvia went on pitifully, "and he seemed so nice at first, but lately he's been different, and his manner has been so funny. He—he looked at me in a horrid way yesterday," she confessed, "and held my hand tight, and when I tried to get away, he laughed. But my contract's signed," she declared with a wail of despair in her voice.

"Haven't the principals of this place interfered?" Anne inquired. "The matron, or whoever it is who's supposed to look after you?"

"They think I'm going home," confessed

Sylvia in an abashed voice. "I managed it so that they should think so."

Anne rose, and with a terrified expression, the girl clung to her hand.

"Oh! Miss Page," she gasped. "You're not going? I'm to sail to-morrow night, and——"

"Don't be frightened, you silly little thing. Of course you won't sail to-morrow, nor any other night. Give me the address of this man."

Sylvia falteringly repeated it.

Anne wrote it down, and stooped to kiss her.

"Unpack all those things, and put them tidy," she said. "I haven't time to scold you now, but I'll come back and do it thoroughly this afternoon."

The girl's look of relief touched her, but she could scarcely repress a smile as she turned at the door, to see her standing like a penitent baby amongst all her finery.

"I wonder what I should have done with daughters?" she asked herself, half humorously, as she stepped into a cab, outside.

The question was answered by a smile and a sigh that were almost simultaneous.

Anne spent a busy morning. She went first to her solicitor, and after an hour's colloquy with him on the case of Sylvia Carfax, she

drove on to her brother's house in Kensington. It stood in a highly respectable square, and was one of the hundreds of dull substantial edifices which came into existence during the mid-Victorian era.

Anne rang the bell, and stood waiting rather excitedly under the stucco canopy supported by pillars.

Her present meeting with Hugh was divided from the last, by a period of twenty years. It was odd to remember how little she knew of this brother, her only near relative in the world. He would be much changed, of course.

A sudden vivid recollection of the last time she had met him, swept through her mind, as she stood waiting admittance. How desolate she had been. How shy. How filled with the sense of being an outsider, a forgotten guest, unbidden to the banquet of life!

The door opened, and it was Hugh himself who drew her over the threshold, and welcomed her in the loud, kind voice she remembered.

"We've been waiting for you all the morning," he declared, "and I rushed down when I heard the bell. Come in and let me look at you! It's impossible to see anything in this wretched foggy atmosphere."

With his arm still round her shoulder, he

pushed open the door of a large room on the right of the hall.

"Here she is, Alice!" he exclaimed, as his wife rose from a sofa near the fire.

"Why Anne, what have you done to yourself?"

The words were uttered in amazement. Anne had slipped off her heavy cloak, and stood laughing tremulously as she held her brother by both hands, and noticed for the first time that his hair was white, and his good-natured bronzed face lined and wrinkled. She turned from him to greet her sister-in-law.

The slim little creature she remembered was a stout matron, whose hair was just touched with grey.

Alice's start of amazement as she gazed a moment before she kissed her, was almost comic.

"Why, Anne, my dear, you've grown quite a beautiful woman!" declared her brother, so simply that the tears sprang to Anne's eyes.

"She's grown younger, hasn't she, Alice?" He looked at her with a puzzled expression.

Anne laughed, and touched her hair. "But it's your white hair that—— And yet I don't know. It's you altogether! I never saw such a change. You—— She looks like a great lady in a French picture, doesn't she, Alice?"

Court of one of the French kings. Louis the Sixteenth, that sort of thing."

Anne laughed again. "My dear boy. You make me embarrassed. Don't stare at me so," she begged.

The pink colour sprang into her cheeks, and the shy deprecating smile of François' portrait crept for a moment to her lips.

"I'm just Anne—twenty years older than when you last saw me."

"Well—it's magic. I give it up," declared Hugh.

"Where are the boys?" she asked, turning with a quick, eager movement to her sister-in-law. "I want to see my nephews."

"They're out to-day. I'm so sorry. They've gone to lunch with some relations of mine. But you'll see them this evening. I let them go because I knew that you would want to talk to Hugh," Alice answered. "You'll excuse me a little while, won't you? I must speak to cook."

Her voice—her tone of deference, marked Alice's recognition of the change in the woman she had once regarded as insignificant, a poor meek creature to be treated with compassion and tolerance; and her husband's awkward laugh as she closed the door, was sufficient indication that her altered attitude was not lost upon him.

"She can't help fussing about the servants. Old habits, you know," he said, turning to his sister. "For years she did all the housework, and she can't give it up."

"But you've finished with work now, haven't you, dear?" Anne asked, as she sat down beside her brother on the sofa.

"Thanks to you." Hugh glanced at her gratefully.

"That money was just what I wanted, Anne. It made me. I only needed capital to develop the farm, and it came just at the right moment. We owe everything to your generosity, dear. And now we're going to talk business. You've put me off in every letter, but I must insist——"

Anne laid her hand quickly on his lips. "I won't hear a word about it!" she declared. "You're not going to rob me of one of the greatest delights of my life, Hugh? The power I once had to help my only brother? You can't be so unkind!"

Her tone of pained entreaty made him laugh. He kissed her again.

"You dear absurd woman! Why haven't you married, Anne?" he exclaimed suddenly. "Some man's been robbed of a wonderful wife. It's not fair of you!"

She smiled. "Tell me about the boys," she urged.

A maid entered to announce that lunch was served, and during the meal, the boys and their prospects were the chief topic of conversation.

"Alice thinks them both geniuses, of course," laughed her husband. "But they're only ordinary youths. I shall be quite satisfied if they can just jog along."

"Rupert has great talent," his mother assured Anne. "Don't listen to Hugh. I'm sure he'll make a splendid architect."

"I'm sure he will," she agreed sympathetically.

"You know we lost our little girl?" said Alice softly, when they returned to the drawing-room.

Her voice suddenly drew Anne's heart.

"The boys are dears, of course," she added. "But I should love to have had a daughter."

Anne was silent a moment. Then with a sudden inspiration, she thought of Sylvia.

"Where's your luggage?" inquired Hugh. "Bless my soul, I'd forgotten it! You're going to stay with us, Anne, of course?"

"Your room is all ready," Alice assured her rather timidly.

"I *was* going back to-day, and coming to

you later. But if I may send for my things from the hotel, I should like to stay a little while. There's a child I know, a girl I must help out of a difficulty, and I find it will take a little time."

She told them Sylvia's story, and noticed with satisfaction that Alice seemed interested.

"Poor silly child!" she exclaimed. "She ought to be taken care of. She ought to live in some nice family."

Anne made a mental note, but at the moment said nothing.

XXII

Two or three days later, she was back at Fairholme Court.

Burks had been sent on to join the other servants, and by the time Anne reached the house, everything was in its usual spotless order.

As she sat looking into the fire the afternoon following her return, Anne felt that it was good to be home. She glanced round the charming room, and experienced a thrill of pleasure. The fresh curtains at the windows with their rose garlands, pleased her eye. The inlaid cabinets, the tables, the dainty bookcases, shining and spotless from the maids' energetic ministrations, reflected the firelight at every angle. The pictures she loved seemed even more beautiful for her absence, and the pots of lilies and hyacinths about the room filled the air with sweet scent.

Anne looked from them to her books, as one glances from one loved face to another. It was good to be home, and she felt happy,

and at rest. Painful misgivings had disappeared, and her mind was filled with contented thoughts of her friends.

From Sylvia, inexpressibly relieved, she had just received a letter of girlish effusion and gratitude.

It was in her hand as she sat smiling into the fire, glad to remember the girl as she had yesterday seen her, pretty once more, gay, and full of extravagantly noble resolutions for the future.

Madge Dakin, who with her husband had returned a few days previously, she had already seen.

She looked thin and pale still, but Anne was satisfied to hear that Harry was the dearest and best of men, and that she had never been so much in love with any one in her life.

To-day Anne found the human comedy agreeable. A spectacle to be viewed with a smile from which tears of pity and sympathy were not very far removed. But the smile came first. She reflected that she must see the Vicar, and she was making up her mind to leave the fireside for that purpose, when the door opened, and he was announced.

She rose quickly with an exclamation of pleasure, and went to meet him.

He took her outstretched hand, but let it

drop again immediately, and glancing at him with half-defined surprise, she saw that he wore his pulpit expression of slightly pompous gravity.

"Sit down," begged Anne, cordially. "I was just coming up to see you."

"Thank you," said the Vicar, dropping heavily into the chair she indicated.

"I saw Sylvia only yesterday. She sent many messages to you, and to her mother."

"Thank you," repeated the Vicar. "It is distressing to me, but I am constrained to say I'm sorry you saw her," he added after a moment's hesitation.

Anne looked at him in silence, and Mr. Carfax cleared his throat.

"Miss Page," he began, "I am here to speak on a very painful subject, and I think the sooner I mention it the better."

"Certainly," said Anne, drawing herself back against the cushions of her chair.

"I repeat, I am sorry you have seen my child, because in future, I say it with great reluctance, I wish her acquaintance with you to cease."

Anne still waited in silence, and again the Vicar cleared his throat. It was difficult to talk with her eyes upon him, and his carefully prepared speeches seemed a trifle ridiculous.

"I'd better tell you the history of this affair from the beginning," he broke out abruptly. "Shortly it is this. Some two or three weeks ago I received a private letter from a lady whose name I will not mention——"

"Madame Didier," interrupted Anne quietly. The Vicar paused.

"Madame Didier, since you seem to know my correspondent. It was a letter written to me as the vicar of the parish, begging me to warn Dr. Dakin against your influence with his wife."

Anne did not speak.

"Madame Didier gave reasons for this interference," he went on after a moment. "Reasons which seemed to me to be based on false and scandalous charges. The letter, however, so intimately concerned my friend, that I was compelled to show it to him. It was burnt in my presence, and such was my implicit confidence in you that I wrote a strong, I may say a threatening letter to the lady, forbidding her to circulate libellous reports."

"I am grateful to you," Anne said.

The Vicar glanced at her.

"I have since regretted that letter," he added deliberately.

"A fortnight ago, business called me to London, and I spent an evening with my wife's

friends, the Lovells. Madame Didier, whose stay in England has been protracted, was with her aunt. I did not know this when I went to see the Lovells," he added, "or I should naturally have avoided the chance of an unpleasant encounter.

"However, in spite of my protestations, and my refusal to hear your name spoken by her, the lady insisted, and to avoid entering upon unpleasant details, I may say at once that she gave me incontrovertible evidence as to the truth of her assertions."

There was a pause which Anne did not break. She sat quite still, looking into the fire.

"I need not say," pursued the Vicar stiffly, "that though I was constrained to offer an apology to Madame Didier for my somewhat intemperate letter, I repeated my warning to her with regard to the danger of spreading this story."

"Thank you," said Anne again.

The Vicar moved uncomfortably.

"Under any other circumstances — had Madame Didier, I mean, merely reported gossip or hearsay, I should immediately have come to you for an explanation, and I should have accepted your bare word against what might to others appear grave suspicion. But unfortunately, as I said, her evidence is incontrovertible.

I have seen letters. In short, to put it plainly, Miss Page, to ask for an explanation from you would be the merest farce. It therefore becomes my painful duty——”

“An explanation of what?” asked Anne, turning to him with a deliberate movement, and again the Vicar fidgeted under her gaze.

“Of—of—a mode of life which proves you to have been unworthy of the position you have held in our midst.”

The Vicar gathered himself together; it was time for the peroration, and from force of habit his voice grew full and deep. He reminded himself vigorously of the sanctity of the home, the preservation of the family, and in sonorous tones continued—

“You have been loved and trusted by pure and innocent women. You have been esteemed as a friend by myself, as well as by many another upright and honourable man. And I say it with pain, you have deceived us. My own child has made you her confidante——”

Anne rose, and the stream of the Vicar’s eloquence suddenly ran dry.

There was a moment’s silence, during which he felt a prey to greater and more paralyzing nervousness than he had experienced since the preaching of his first sermon.

The pause was broken by the opening of

the door, and the appearance of Burks with a letter on a tray.

"This is sent down from the Vicarage, ma'am," she said, addressing her mistress, "and the maid says will Mr. Carfax kindly read it at once."

She handed the tray to the Vicar, who took the letter, and with a murmured apology, broke the envelope. A note from his wife dropped out first. He picked it up, and hurriedly glanced through its contents.

"I am wild with anxiety. I send you the enclosed, which has just come from Mrs. Lovell, so that you may read it while you are with Miss Page. She may perhaps be able to throw some light upon the matter. At any rate, ask her advice. She is so good and wise."

The Vicar snatched up the other letter, which mechanically, in a dazed voice, he began to read aloud.

"MY DEAR MARY,

"I hasten to tell you, though I fear too late, of something I have just heard about your dear Sylvia. She has signed a contract to go to America with a theatrical travelling company, and I am told that she has already sailed. The manager I understand to be a

man of bad character, as indeed he must be to induce a girl to leave England without her parents' consent. This has come to my knowledge in a roundabout way through a chorus girl who happens to be related to my maid. I should have telegraphed, but Simpkins has just showed me the announcement of the company's departure from Liverpool, and in that case a telegram is useless.

"All my sympathy, dear. In haste,

'Your affectionate

"LAURA LOVELL."

Mr. Carfax dropped the letter.

In the waning light, Anne saw that his face was white.

"You must have known of this!" he broke out fiercely. "You must have known, I say!"

Anne moved swiftly to his side, and laid her hand on his arm.

"It's all right," she whispered hurriedly. "I *did* know. I stopped it. Sylvia is quite safe, at Carlisle House. If I had guessed that such news would reach you, I would have told you at once. I was going to tell you when you came in. But you put it out of my head," she added simply.

The Vicar's colour had not returned. He stood mopping his forehead slowly with his

handkerchief, his face working so painfully that Anne, her eyes full of tears, turned away.

She opened her writing-table, and rang the bell.

"What are you going to do?" stammered her companion.

"Send a note to your wife. I can't bear to think of her anxiety."

"True," murmured the Vicar. "You are very kind. It's like you—to think of everything," he added, still in a dazed voice.

He began to pace the room with uneven steps.

"If the maid has gone, run up as quickly as you can to the Vicarage with this note," said Anne, sealing the envelope, as Burks entered.

"She's still here, ma'am."

"Then give it to her, and tell her to go *at once*, please, Burks. It's important. Don't keep her a moment longer talking."

The maid disappeared, and Anne lighted the candles on the mantelpiece, quietly, one by one.

"You need have no anxiety," she said without looking at the Vicar. "Sylvia has been very imprudent, but she realizes it, and is sorry. She had arranged with me to come home and tell you all about it, as soon as I had first spoken to you. She seemed to think that

I might have some—some little influence. But I must now leave her to tell her own story. I only want you to understand that she's safe. I went to my solicitor about the matter, and as she is under age, he had no difficulty in settling the whole affair."

"But—this man?" demanded Mr. Carfax in an unsteady voice. "The man Mrs. Lovell mentions?"

For the first time she glanced at him, and saw the fear in his eyes.

"Be quite easy. Sylvia had no idea of any evil intention on the man's part. She is only utterly ignorant and inexperienced. She is one of the pure and innocent woman you mentioned just now."

Her voice was gentle, and had not a trace of bitterness.

The Vicar continued for a moment his perambulation of the room.

Then he stopped abruptly and raised his head.

"Thank you," he said in a husky tone. "I owe you a debt I can never repay. I——" he hesitated painfully. "I wish to God——" he broke out again, and again paused. She looked at him steadily.

All the pompous self-importance had died out of his face; all the arrogance of the priest

who denounces the sinner. His was the very human face of a man still gasping with relief from deadly fear, still unable to believe that the threatened danger is over. And with this expression of scarcely assured safety there was mingled real sorrow, a look of real affection for the woman to whom he owed his escape from a crushing blow.

"You spoke of an explanation," said Anne in a low voice. "A moment ago I should have asked you to leave me, because of the manner in which you spoke of it.

"Now I have changed my mind, and I think I should like to give you an explanation—*my* explanation."

She was still standing, still looking at him steadily.

"You were kind enough to say that people here had loved and trusted me. I am glad if that is the case—very glad." She waited a moment.

"If as you say they have been good enough to give me their love and confidence, it is because I have understood them; because they have never been afraid to tell me their inmost thoughts. Well, you will not believe me, perhaps,—that power of understanding would never have been mine but for the 'mode of life' to which you have alluded.

"Twenty years ago, Mr. Carfax, I was a self-doubting, colourless woman. My youth, as I thought, was past. It had brought me nothing. No love, no human experience, no joys, no very deep sorrows even. Nothing but the grey hopeless depression of a woman who has never taken her part in the world, who has always stood outside, who knows nothing of life; the sort of woman who ignorant to begin with, grows narrower and more prejudiced as the years pass, till at last in the bitter sense of the word, she is an old maid by nature, useless as a friend, helpless as a comforter, of no account in a world of men and women she cannot understand.

"Well, before that happened to me, before I was old in heart at least, I met a man who loved me, and whom I loved. I might have married him. I chose *not* to marry him, because——" She smiled a little. "I need not trouble you with my reasons. They seemed good reasons to me, and I have never regretted them. I lived with him for three years. The memory of those three years has lasted with me to this day, and has made me a woman so proud and happy that if my deep content has overflowed, and reached the lives of others, it is no credit to me. I simply can't help caring for people, because by the mercy of

Heaven, I have loved and been loved. Nothing else, for me at least, would have made that understanding and caring possible. Not the money that came to me, nor the opportunities it afforded for what is called 'doing good.' It was a change in *me*, that was needed, a personal experience of loving and suffering. Well! I have loved and I have suffered, and now I *understand*.

"That's my little story. It's a story I would not have told you ten minutes ago. But—well, you made me feel just now that you were human.

"Don't imagine you see before you the sinner that repenteth. She has never repented. She never will repent, though it's an old white-haired woman who is talking—to a man years younger than herself!"

Her eyes met his, and beneath their smiling gaze, half wise, half whimsical, the Vicar dropped his own, and reddened like a school-boy.

The gentle reproof, implied rather than spoken, went home.

Suddenly, in the presence of this dignified gracious woman, he felt raw and awkward, very young, more than a little ashamed. He was confused moreover, with the sense that there existed possibly whole realms of

experience which no code of morals he had ever preached seemed adequate to cover.

Here was a woman who certainly possessed the fairest of the Christian virtues. She was gentle, tolerant, generous (with a twinge of compunction he realized how great a part the anticipated loss of her donations had played in his reflections during the walk from the Vicarage to Fairholme Court). She was patient, longsuffering,—the Vicar ran through the whole gamut of spiritual gifts, and acknowledged her richly endowed.

Could it be that there were other paths to the Kingdom of Heaven than the strait way and the narrow gate that alone were said to lead to salvation?

The very useful brain of Mr. Carfax, unaccustomed to be exercised in unusual directions, began to feel the strain, and its possessor wisely took the hint, and abandoned the fatiguing labour of original research.

In any case Miss Page was a charming woman, and by however amazing process the result had been achieved, a good one also.

He looked at her, and with a sudden frank movement, held out his hand.

“Forgive me,” he said simply. “You—you have shown me I had no right to judge. I beg your pardon.”

Anne put her hand into his with a very sweet smile.

"My dear friend," she replied, "you must do what you think right, and Dymfield will not be behind the judgment of most of the world in this matter. You know I love the place, but I can't stay here when the people no longer look upon me as a friend. Well, the world is wide, and fortunately for me I'm not a poor woman."

"You mustn't leave us! You won't leave us!" begged the Vicar. "There will be no occasion. The position is unchanged. The only two people who know anything of—of the matter, are your friends. Even if through malice or carelessness a breath of scandal should reach others, surely you can trust us to treat the rumour with the——" He hesitated

"With the contempt it doesn't deserve?" suggested Anne gently.

Greatly to his surprise, and somewhat to his horror, the Reverend George Carfax was betrayed into an answering smile.

He hastened to efface it, but the deed was done.

"And Sylvia?" asked Anne tentatively. "I wanted her to stay with me for a few days. You have only to say if you would rather she did not, and I won't ask her."

"If after all the trouble she has given you, Sylvia will be welcome, I can answer for her delight," returned Mr. Carfax promptly.

Anne put out her hand with an impulsive gesture.

"You are quite a dear!" she observed, and her sudden smile still further illuminated the dusky corners of the Vicar's strictly limited imagination.

The entrance of Burks with the tea-things gave him a moment to recover from the shock of a series of mental and emotional upheavals to which he was unaccustomed.

"You will stay, of course?" begged Anne. "My note to your wife was quite explicit," she added. "She won't be anxious now."

"Thank you," said Mr. Carfax. "I want to hear particulars about Sylvia, and I feel I should be all the better for a cup of tea."

Five minutes later, Mrs. Carfax entered a room bright with fire and candle-light, in which her husband sat comfortably ensconced in an arm-chair opposite to Miss Page, who was passing him hot cakes of a delicious crispness.

Anne went quickly across the room.

"It's quite right. Don't worry," she hastened to say, as she kissed her visitor. "I'm just telling your husband all about it."

"Sylvia must come home!" declared her

mother, after Anne's recital. Her hand was still trembling as she put down her tea-cup. "She's not fit to be left alone in a great wicked city. I always *said* to George it was madness to let her go away from us!"

"It's so difficult to get women to take broad views," complained the Vicar, turning to Anne, "It requires the masculine mind, free from prejudice and indifferent to common opinion, to see the wider outlook."

Anne laid her hand on his wife's arm:

"Dear Mrs. Carfax, do let her finish her training," she urged. "The child acknowledges her foolishness. I quite agree that she ought not to be alone, and before you came in, I was suggesting a plan to your husband."

"Let her go to my brother and his wife. They lost their little girl some years ago, and Alice has always longed for a daughter. She's such a nice kind little woman, and she would treat Sylvia as her own child. I spoke to her of the possibility of this, before I left London, and she was delighted with the idea."

"It would be a splendid thing for her, Mary, if it can be arranged. It's so like Miss Page to have thought of such a plan."

Mrs. Carfax hesitated.

"We must think about it. I wouldn't give my consent for her to go anywhere else. But

if it's a case of *your* relations, dear, it's different. I should feel safe and happy about her, of course. We must talk about it, George."

Anne leant back against her sofa cushions with a satisfied expression.

When her visitors rose to go, she followed them to the door.

While his wife was being helped into her goloshes by Burks, outside in the hall, the Vicar lingered a moment to hold her hand in a tight grasp.

"I can never thank you enough," he murmured. "You are the best woman I ever met," he added, looking her straight in the face.

Anne flushed a little; there were tears in her eyes.

"Good-bye," she said. "I shall look forward to having Sylvia here next week."

When the hall door had closed, she drew a deep breath of exhaustion and relief.

She had won peace with honour. She knew it, and was thankful. But she was glad to be alone.

She walked round the room, bending over the pots of lilies of the valley, touching the waxen bells of the hyacinths with gentle fingers. They had been grown for her home-coming,

and they welcomed her delicately. She stirred the fire to a brighter blaze, and smiled to see its glow spreading to the furthest corner of the room.

Never had her home seemed so sweet, so inviting, so restful.

"It would have broken my heart to leave it!" she thought with sudden conviction.

She looked at the bookcases filled with books all the more precious, because for three months she had not touched them.

Finally she reached for a volume on one of the upper shelves, and taking it to the sofa, turned to a poem she loved.

*"Mère des souvenirs, maîtresse des maîtresses,
O toi, tous mes plaisirs! O toi, tous mes devoirs!
Tu te rappelleras la beauté des caresses,
La douceur du foyer et le charme des soirs,
Mère des souvenirs, maîtresse des maîtresses!"*

*"Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon,
Et les soirs au balcon, voilés de vapeurs roses.
Que ton sein m'était doux! que ton cœur m'était bon!
Nous avons dit souvent d'impérissables choses,
Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon."*

Anne let the book slip into her lap. "*Nous avons dit souvent d'impérissables choses,*" she repeated softly.

It was of these "imperishable things" she was thinking, the things of the spirit, that

persist when as with her the desire of the flesh is dead, and the lust of the eyes. The imperishable things that last into the evening of life, when the stars come out, and ever nearer and nearer draw the "murmurs and scents of the infinite sea."

XXIII

It was two years before François Fontenelle re-visited Fairholme Court. Again it was June, and Anne had taken him to the garden, full of pride to show him her roses in the height of their beauty.

They strolled round its paths talking of a thousand things, and finally sat down under the arch, over which there poured a cascade of snowy bloom. The table in front of the bench was littered with papers, which François began idly to examine.

"*The New Thought!*" he exclaimed, holding up one of the leaflets between his finger and thumb. "What on earth are *you* doing with this latter day product?"

Anne laughed. "A strenuous young thing who is spending her holiday in the village brought a heap of papers this morning, and begged me to read them. She said it was scandalous that such an intelligent woman as I appeared to her, should be ignorant of the 'movement,'" she added demurely.

"Whatever the modern young woman lacks, it isn't cheek," he returned.

"Well! What do you think of the 'no property' idea in the eternally boring sex question? Let me see, there are to be state babies, aren't there? Have state lovers been suggested yet, or is that a figment of my imagination?"

Anne sighed. "Perhaps I'm too old for it," she said. "I know I don't understand it. It all seems to me so terribly business-like, and I was never a business woman."

François laughed. "I should as soon expect one of these roses to start company promoting."

"One thing I feel quite sure about," she went on, drawing her lace shawl round her shoulders. "The men and women who write some of these letters have never loved."

"Love has gone out of fashion in England, and the new wisdom has taken its place," observed François. "Its professors are gentlemen who live on grape nuts, and are occupied municipally. They don't believe in love, partly because a diet of grape nuts is not conducive to the emotion, partly because they are afraid of disagreeing with Mr. Bernard Shaw. You have saved me from belonging to the latter class, but only as a brand is snatched from the burning."

"The simile is ill-chosen," declared Anne serenely. "There's no fire about any of the new doctrines. They are all eminently cool, calculating and dull. Dull as ditch-water, and quite as appetizing."

François smiled. "You are a very old-fashioned woman, Anne," he declared, "and the sight of these things near you is absurd, and even indecent."

He swept them from the table.

"Go and fetch your Herrick, and read me how roses first came red, and lilies white."

"My lord shall be obeyed—another time," said Anne laughing.

"How is Mrs. Dakin?" asked François suddenly, lighting a cigarette.

Anne was engaged in pushing the end of a trailing green branch through one of the spaces in the lattice work.

"She and the baby, who is six weeks old to-day, are away on a visit to her mother. She is very well, and exceedingly happy," she added after a moment spent in arranging the branch to her satisfaction.

"I'm glad to hear it."

She turned to him. "I believe you are, François."

"I'm also glad to hear she's away, since

because of that circumstance presumably I was honoured with an invitation to-day."

"Why haven't I seen you for so long?" inquired Anne irrelevantly.

"I was afraid to come," he said, looking at her with a smile.

"Why?"

"Oh, not because I dreaded a scene with you. Have you ever made a scene in your life, Anne? You ought to have done it once at least, to prove your affinity with the sex you adorn. But I don't believe you ever have. No. I was afraid of your eyes."

"What's the matter with my eyes?" she asked, with a smile concealed in them.

"Anne Page, if you're going to flirt with me I give you due warning that I'm a poor weak man, and I can't answer for the consequences."

She laughed. "The baby is a darling, and I'm its godmother. They've called her *Anne*."

"They may, but they needn't flatter themselves she'll ever be as attractive as Anne Page."

"Her father already thinks her the most lovely creature in the world—except his wife."

"And how are all the other worthies? Still at your feet, I suppose?"

"They are all charming to me. My little

friend Sylvia, the Vicar's daughter, sang at her first concert the other night, and had a great success. The vicarage is standing on its head with pride, in consequence."

"And the pastoral life still amuses you?"

"Very much."

"Wonderful woman!"

"Dear François, why not?" she asked.

"You know I am a very simple person."

"Yes. Though you were once the queen of quite a brilliant salon."

She was silent.

"When are you coming over to see your picture?"

"This autumn." For a moment she paused.

"You know my wishes, François? I have left René's pictures to the Luxembourg. The two we like best—you know them—are to hang on either side of the portrait. It's in my will, of course."

He smoked a moment without speaking.

"I wonder if he'll come and look at them?" he said at last. "I think he will, and you'll smile at him out of the portrait."

"I'm so glad he liked it," she answered softly, after a long pause.

"He only saw it once. I never dared show it to him again. That's why I put it away."

The birds had begun their evening song,

and the garden rang with the voices of black-birds and thrushes.

"Well! I must get back to *The Chase*," declared François, glancing at his watch. "I shall be late for dinner as it is. This is good-bye till September. Not a moment later mind, and then you will stay in Paris a decent time?"

He looked at her, as she got up and stood for a moment embowered in the roses, her lace shawl hanging from her arms, her figure still beautiful and gracious.

"The gods have granted you the gift of eternal youth, Anne," he declared. "I want to paint another portrait."

She laughed, and shook her head.

"There will be no more portraits," she said.

She went with him as far as a little gate which gave upon the meadows, through which a field path led to *The Chase*.

After he had gone she wandered into the lavender-garden, and in the gathering summer twilight paced the path between the grey-green borders.

In the west, the sky was still flushed with sunset. The air, so quiet that not a leaf trembled, was sweet with the scent of flowers.

Anne walked slowly, her mind occupied with

pleasant trifles. She decided that the lilies in the south border must this autumn be divided. She must tell Davis to plant more daffodils in the orchard under the apple trees. There was the village children's treat to be considered, and she must not forget to talk it over with the Vicar. Suddenly she remembered that Dr. Dakin was coming in to smoke his pipe and talk. Madge and the baby were returning on Thursday. He would therefore be in excellent spirits.

The roses on the hedge round the sundial breathed a sweet strong fragrance into the dusk.

Anne picked one of them, and tucked it into the front of her gown, before she turned towards the house.

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